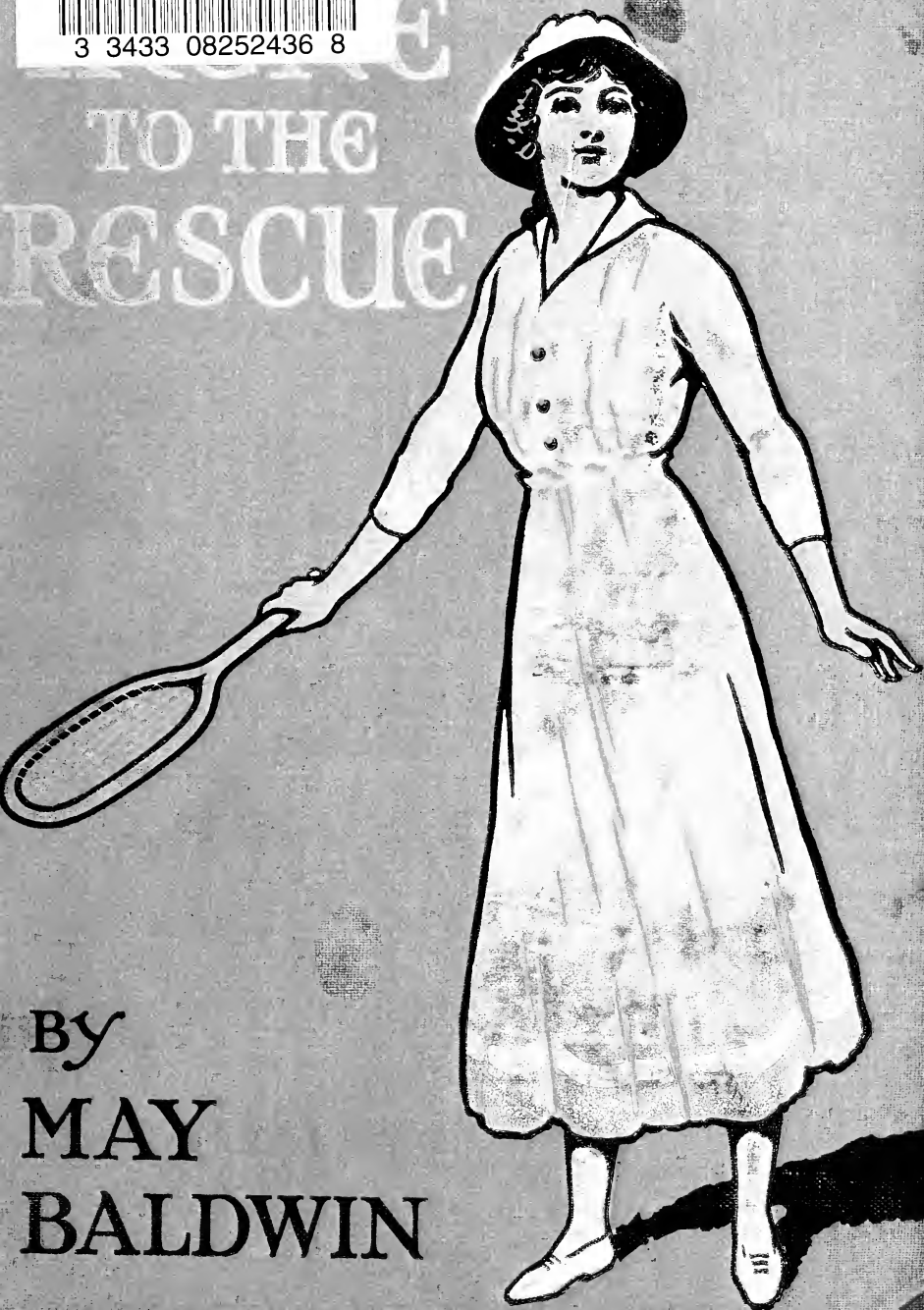


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TO THE RESCUE



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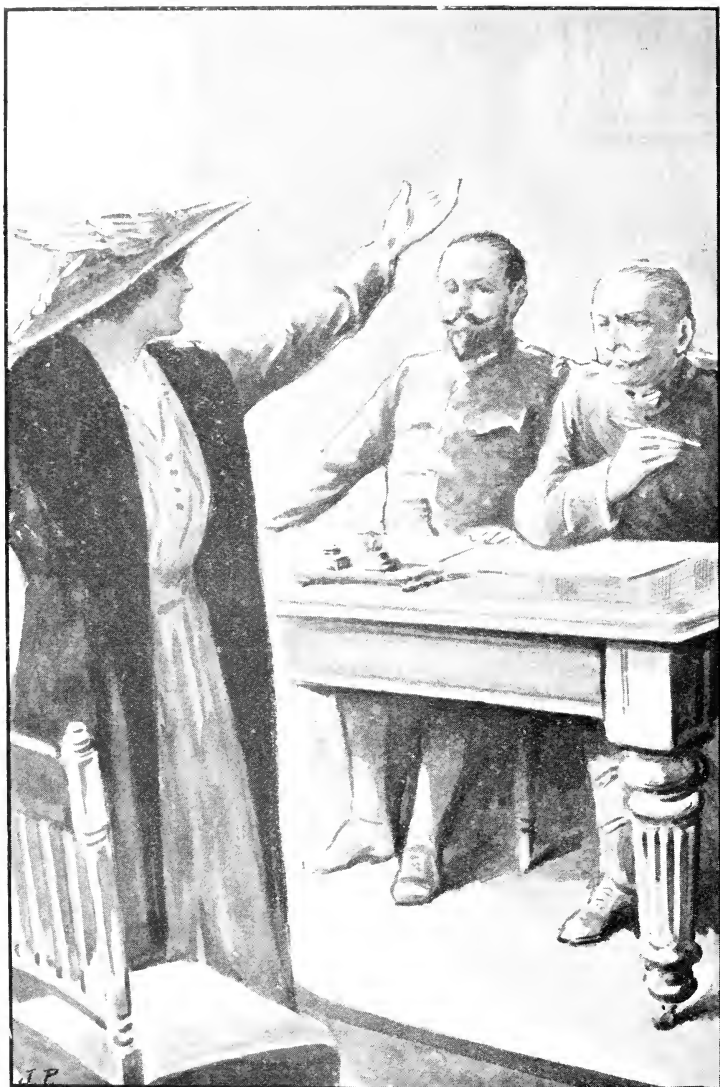
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Irene to the Rescue



‘There is no real cause for suspicion against the family.’

L.R.—*Front.*

PAGE 286.

Irene to the Rescue

THE STORY OF AN ENGLISH GIRL'S FIGHT
FOR THE RIGHT

By MAY BALDWIN

Author of

'Mrs Manning's Wards,' 'Phyllis McPhilemy,' 'A Ripping Girl,'
'A Schoolgirl's Diary,' &c.

Illustrated by J. Petts

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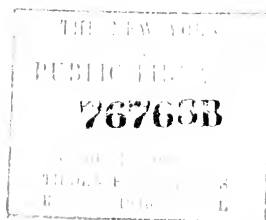
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BY MAY BALDWIN.

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IRENE TO THE RESCUE.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE TENNIS-COURT.

‘**G**AME!’ cried out a clear young voice with more annoyance than pleasure, as the speaker came up to the tennis-net, sweeping up balls with her racket very dexterously.

‘*Tiens!* game! I felicit you on your success,’ came from her opponent in soft accents, which were almost a caress.

The girl looked at the boy scornfully. ‘Felicitate!’ she corrected; ‘and if you wish to talk English, pray talk it properly. “Congratulate” is the word you ought to have used; though, if you had a spark of sport in you, you would be ashamed to be beaten by a girl younger than yourself. But you French are no good at games, and never will be.’

‘Mademoiselle, I should be ashamed as a Frenchman to beat any lady, most of all “a girl younger than myself,”’ he replied in the same soft voice, making her a bow, and holding his straw hat in his hand, as he advanced

to the other side of the net and confronted her with laughing eyes.

The two stood for a second looking straight at each other, and then the girl broke out, 'Maurice, you are hopeless, absolutely hopeless! You are French from the hair of your head down to the soles of your feet,' she declared vehemently.

Maurice made a feint of trying to see the top of his head by turning his eyes upwards, and then peered down at his toes; after which he raised mocking eyes to the girl. 'You think? And yet I am not all French. I am half English; but it is the part you cannot see—the heart, which is quite English, every beat of it,' he replied, and laid his hand upon his breast as he looked at her sentimentally.

The girl turned on her heel. 'You have not any heart to be anything at all,' she threw over her shoulder at him, and then returned quickly to the net, on which Maurice was leaning. 'Do be careful, Maurice; you'll stretch the net; it's none too well put up as it is. I could not make Armand understand how important it was that it should be properly stretched, and—— There, I knew you would do it! You have broken the tape,' she wound up crossly.

'*Ma belle cousine*, do not distress yourself for such a trifle. See, I can easily tie together the ends; and what is a tape, after all, to disturb the serenity of your brow and spoil this glorious summer morn? Come, I

will play you another game, and vanquish you. Put thus, it may be possible for me to do so; it was your brutal English word to "beat" that paralysed my arm,' he replied amiably.

'I'd sooner speak brutal English, as you call it, than the roundabout stuff you talk. I believe in calling a spade a spade; then people know what you are talking about. But you could not speak the plain truth if you were to be shot the next minute for not doing so,' she retorted.

'I do not know. I have no desire to be shot. I might do many things to avoid that catastrophe,' the boy replied, always in the same playful way.

Years afterwards this scene rose before the girl's eyes, and she saw her companion standing on the lawn, gay, graceful, full of strength which he never exerted if he could avoid it, and she remembered these words of his.

'If I were a man I'd scorn to speak like that,' she cried, looking impatiently at him.

'*Tiens!* like how? You wish me to like being shot; but it is unreasonable of you, my dear cousin,' he argued.

'At least you need not say openly that you would do anything to avoid being shot. It—it's so unmanly,' she exclaimed.

'Ah! and yet you have just said that you wish me to speak the truth, and call a spade a spade,' he suggested, idly playing with a tennis-ball as he spoke.

‘It ought not to be the truth,’ she cried.

‘No? You think one should desire above all things to end this life? But I think life very delightful, and I have no desire to end it with a shot; nor have I ever heard that the English as a nation are great soldiers. On the contrary, I have heard them called a “nation of shopkeepers,”’ he said, always in his soft way.

His companion stamped her foot. ‘You are the most exasperating person I ever met, and you are only pretending to misunderstand me. I never said I wanted you to end your life with a shot,’ she cried.

But Maurice, who delighted in rousing his cousin’s temper, continued: ‘*Deo gratias!* I breathe again! I was contemplating an immediate suicide to please you, and wondered at what distance it would be best to execute the deed.’

‘Idiot!’ muttered the girl, and continued vehemently, ‘Anyway, I’m glad you are the only male relative I have who is not a soldier or a sailor, or going to be one.’

‘You forget I have no choice. I am reformed,’ he observed.

‘Reformed! What do you mean? Reformed religion? And how does that prevent your going into the army? And since when have you joined this reformed affair?’ asked the girl with some scorn.

‘It is your brutal English again which is at fault. Evidently I have again called a spade

something else. *Réformé* means that I have been judged unfit for my military service. We in France are all soldiers if our health and circumstances permit,' he explained.

'Oh well, anyhow, you said you were glad you were not going to be a soldier, and you look quite all right. However, I dare say you wouldn't be any good in the army,' she said.

'You are not polite, my dear cousin. I do not like your spade talk. I like your play at tennis best. Come, let us have another game,' he said still amiably, for Maurice de Carney's good temper, like his good manners, was imperturbable.

'Very well; but we had better change courts. The sun is in your eyes, and you will play better with it behind you. I don't mind it a bit,' she said.

'Never! It is impossible. I could not allow you to be blinded by the sun, *chère René*,' he began.

But Irene Mathers interrupted him abruptly, 'My name is Irene, if it is all the same to you.'

'It is quite the same to me. You are *ma reine*, my queen, whatever I call you,' he said with earnestness under his playful manner.

Irene looked at him wrathfully for a minute, and then a twitching of his lips, which showed her that he was with difficulty suppressing a smile, opened the floodgates of her anger. 'How dare you?' she exclaimed.

'How I dare what?' he inquired innocently.

‘How dare you pay me impertinent compliments, even though you are my cousin? It is ungentlemanly. No English boy would ever do such a thing even in fun, and I thought your mother said French people were much more particular than English people, and she is rather shocked at my freedom of manners, as she calls it. I wonder what she would say to you,’ cried Irene hotly.

The boy cast a hasty glance up at the windows of the château, at one of which sat two ladies; but, seeing them smiling at him, he replied, ‘They look content, and we are being chaperoned. It is quite proper,’ he remarked.

Irene’s glance followed his. ‘They can’t hear the rubbish you are talking, or they would not be so content, as you call it. Anyway, mother would not; she hates that stupid sort of talk. I don’t know what your mother might say. She has quite French ideas. I suppose that is through living so long in France. No one would think she was mother’s sister,’ she said, her wrath having died away as rapidly as it rose.

For one thing, it was quite useless getting angry with Maurice de Carney—like pouring water on a duck’s back. There is nothing more aggravating than wasting one’s indignation on some one who will not take any notice of it. Moreover, Maurice never did mean seriously to annoy, and, above all, he was French, and that explained or excused everything.

‘On the contrary, I think my mother is very like my aunt Mabel. She is quite English, and I can assure you I am considered quite English by my comrades at our college,’ Maurice informed her.

Irene gave a little scornful laugh. ‘Then they do not know much about English boys. Why, you are just everything an English boy is not,’ she cried.

‘Indeed! Suppose, instead of continuing this hot sport with the sun in our eyes, we go and ask if we may sit under those trees at the other end of the lawn?’ said Maurice.

Irene stared at him in astonishment. ‘Ask if we may go and sit on those chairs! Why on earth should we ask? It is not damp?’ she added as an afterthought.

‘No, but it is farther away,’ he began doubtfully.

Irene gave a ringing laugh. ‘And you are seventeen years old, and afraid to go a few yards farther away from your mother!’ she cried.

‘It is not a few yards; it is some distance. Besides, it is not that I am afraid; it is simply that in France—in short, that I wish to show you respect, and I do not know that my aunt will grant me the privilege of a long conversation with you out of earshot. A game is a different thing, and, with your permission, I will just run and ask her.’ With another bow and a sweeping salute of his hat, the boy went across the lawn towards the terrace, at one of

the windows overlooking which sat Mrs Mathers and her sister, Madame de Carney of Château Carney, in the north of France.

‘You may tell them we shall probably come to blows,’ Irene called out after him.

Maurice gave his light laugh, and continued on his errand, and returned with the desired permission. ‘My aunt desires that you wear this shawl, as it is in the shade, and she fears you may be hot after our strenuous game,’ he observed, carefully putting a wrap round Irene’s shoulders.

‘What nonsense! I am quite cool. Fancy calling that a strenuous game! Mother imagined I was playing in England. I do get hot there sometimes; but you sky all your balls. I can almost catch them by walking across the court,’ she replied as she walked towards the trees with her cousin, above whom she towered in spite of his being two years her senior.

‘Oh, a hammock! You must have had this put here since yesterday. After all, Maurice, you have your points,’ cried Irene; and with this praise Maurice was quite repaid for the trouble he had taken to please his very exacting cousin.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY OF MAURICE.

THE two matrons at the window watched the progress of their two children with fond eyes.

‘Dear children, how well they get on together!’ cried Madame de Carney, looking at her son with adoration.

‘They are scarcely children,’ said her sister musingly; ‘nor am I certain that they do get on very well. It seemed to me this morning that I heard Irene’s voice raised in anything but amicable tones.’

‘Oh, they disagree in arguments, but I think it is only *pour passer le temps*. They make it up in a few minutes, and are as great friends as ever. Hear them now—how they are laughing together! I am so glad that one of your children can be happy at Château Carney,’ said Madame de Carney with some feeling and unconscious reproach.

‘English boys are so different from French boys!’ observed Mrs Mathers half-apologetically.

The fact was, her two sons had formerly accepted pressing invitations from their French aunt, as they called her, to spend their holidays at Château Carney; but after they had reached their teens they got on less and less well with

Maurice de Carney, the only son and heir to the beautiful old château. 'He's such a muff,' one declared on his return from a visit, and the other objected to him as a 'rotter.' When Mrs Mathers asked them in what way their French cousin offended them they could not or would not explain, and the only charge they could bring against him was that he was so 'beastly polite.'

'Yes; but I consider my boy half English,' began Madame de Carney, and stopped at sight of her sister's involuntary look of surprise. 'I have brought him up, and *I* consider him half English. I hope you are not going back on your promise to consider him so too,' she said, repeating her statement with some emphasis.

'No, of course not, though I am not sure that it is quite right,' said Mrs Mathers.

'Right! How could it be wrong?' demanded her sister.

'I mean, I have sometimes wondered whether it is quite fair to Irene.' Mrs Mathers hesitated.

'I don't understand you. How can it be unfair to Irene? You do not object to my boy, I hope?' put in Madame de Carney.

'No indeed; I like Maurice. I was only thinking that perhaps it was a mistake not to tell him the truth at the beginning. I like everything to be above-board,' said Mrs Mathers.

Madame de Carney drew herself up. 'I

hope I like honesty as much as you, Mabel ; but you must allow me to be the best judge of what I ought or ought not to tell my boy, for he is mine. However, we will not discuss that. I understood you to say that you thought it was not fair to Irene, which is quite another matter, though I do not see where the unfairness lies, if you like the boy, and if Irene likes him.'

Mrs Mathers frowned. 'It is difficult to explain ; but, you see, Irene allows herself a certain freedom with Maurice because she thinks he is her first cousin, whereas he is no blood-relation at all,' she said at last.

'He is my dear husband's son, and she called him Uncle Emile, and was very fond of him,' said Madame de Carney hastily, and her eyes filled with tears ; for, though Monsieur de Carney had been dead three years, she still mourned for him very sincerely.

'Yes, so were we all, and for his sake and yours we should like to look upon Maurice as one of us ; but he is no relation,' repeated Mrs Mathers.

'But it was his father's greatest hope that he would be one day. He was very fond of Irene, and said she had such a good influence upon Maurice even as a little girl,' said Madame de Carney.

'She is only a little girl now, and Maurice is almost a man ; and, Isabel, though I do not wish to vex you, I think it most unwise to make plans for other people's future.

I will not affect to misunderstand you. You would like to make a match between those two, and are throwing them together with that object; but Irene is an English girl, and must choose her own husband; and if your boy is half English he will probably wish to choose for himself also.'

Madame de Carney laughed confidently. 'I have no fear about Maurice. His one wish is to marry an English wife, as his father did before him; and I know he admires Irene,' she replied.

'What a boy of seventeen admires is no criterion of what he may like at twenty-five,' said Mrs Mathers.

'I mean him to marry as soon as he comes of age, when he comes into the property,' announced Maurice's mother.

Mrs Mathers looked displeased, but only said, 'I advise you not to speak of this project of yours to either of those two, unless you wish it to come to nothing; and I wish still more that you would dismiss it from your mind, or at least not set your heart upon it. I do not believe in arranging marriages.'

'And yet there are quite as many happy marriages made that way as by the English way. However, we have plenty of time before discussing the settlements, and for the present it is enough for me to see the boy happy and enjoying the society of a good, healthy-minded English girl like Irene. She is so downright, she cannot fail to do Maurice good.'

‘She will, at all events, learn good manners from him. I think I never met any one with more perfect manners or a greater facility for saying just the right and tactful things,’ said Mrs Mathers, prompted to say something nice about Maurice in return for the compliments showered upon Irene.

Madame de Carney did not seem as gratified with this praise as her sister expected, but sighed as she said, ‘Yes, that is the trouble. I sometimes wish he could have been educated in England, and so have learnt a little bluntness and hardness from our public schoolboys. Maurice is the most affectionate and attentive son a mother could wish to have, and every one finds him perfectly charming ; but he is too—too tender, too soft, for a man ; that is why Irene is such a good tonic for him, even if they never meet again.’

The two sisters were engaged on lacework, an industry of the peasants in that district, and unconsciously lapsed into silence. As they bent over their frames and worked at an intricate stitch, each was thinking over the conversation they had been having on the subject of their children.

Madame de Carney, as will have been inferred, was a second wife. Her marriage with the late owner of Château Carney had been rather romantic.

Mrs Mathers’s memory went back to a summer which she and her sister had spent in northern France, where they had taken a

great fancy to a pretty little French baby who was out to nurse in a farmhouse at which they were lodging. The little boy was pining for his dead mother, the farmer's wife said, and she doubted their being able to rear him.

Mrs Mathers's younger sister, who, though unmarried, was very fond of babies, took the little fellow into her charge, and to her great delight induced him to eat and to sleep in her arms. She was just crooning him to sleep one day in the garden of the farmhouse, when Monsieur de Carney, riding up on his horse, saw the pretty picture, and heard how the young English lady had, according to the farmer's wife, saved his baby's life. 'A true mother she has been to him, monsieur,' she assured the grateful widower; and it is not surprising that the English girl became his mother by marriage very shortly after.

Major Mathers, like the average Briton, objected to marriages of mixed nationality, especially with a widower; but as his sister-in-law was of age, and had no parents to raise objections, and as Monsieur de Carney was a rich man and had an assured position, the marriage took place.

Soon after, Major Mathers died in India, or he might have objected to one stipulation the young bride made—namely, that Maurice should never be told that he was not her own son. The child had been born away from Château Carney, where his own mother had never been seen. Monsieur de Carney's first

marriage, it was understood, had been a *mésalliance*. Very few people, therefore, had any suspicion that Maurice was not the present Madame de Carney's son, as she always called him, and in time almost believed him to be.

Mrs Mathers had promised to keep her secret, thinking that when her sister had children of her own they would share this passionate affection. But, alas! Madame de Carney's own baby died, and Maurice remained her only child. Accordingly, it caused Mrs Mathers much embarrassment when her two sturdy boys declared that they didn't believe Maurice had any English blood in him, and that he was not in the least like Aunt Isabel, little knowing how true their words were.

Suddenly Madame de Carney looked up from her lace flounce. 'Mabel,' she observed, 'I had a rather disagreeable visitor the other day.'

'Had you? Who was it?' asked her sister.

'It was—he said he was Emile's brother-in-law,' Madame de Carney explained. Emile was her late husband.

Mrs Mathers exclaimed, 'You mean'—and hesitated.

'Yes, Maurice's uncle,' Madame de Carney said.

'Did Maurice see him?' inquired her sister with interest, wondering how his step-mother could hope to keep the real facts of her boy's birth secret if his mother's relatives were going to clamour for recognition.

‘No, indeed; Maurice was at college, fortunately. But that is not the worst,’ she replied, and then stopped.

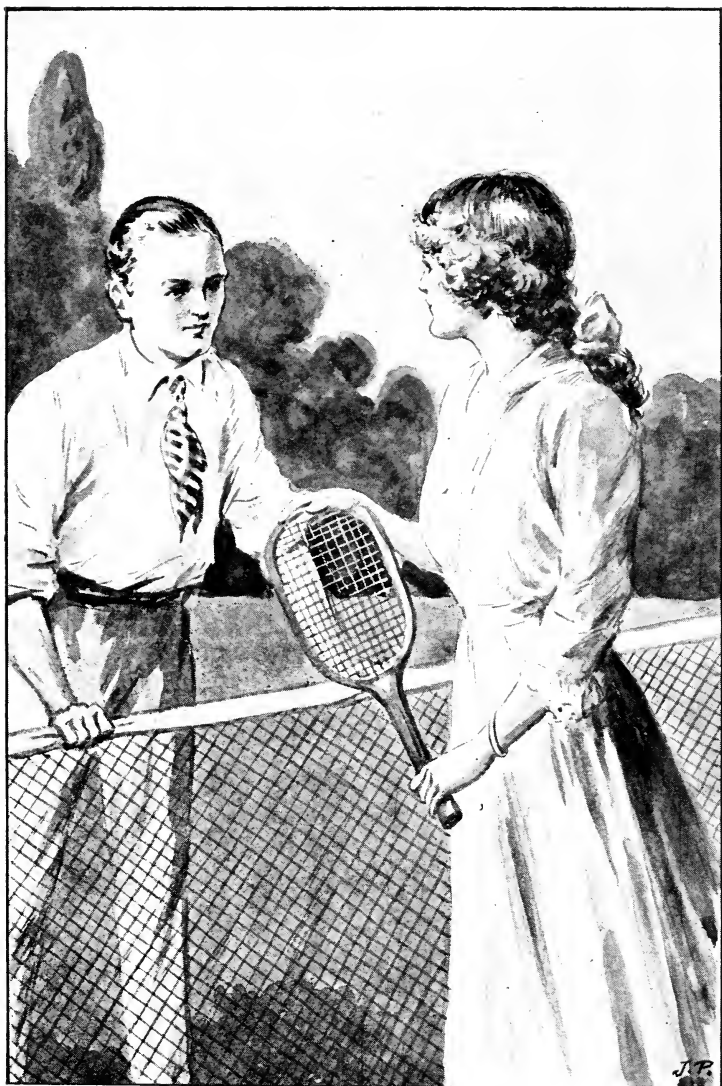
‘Was he very impossible? Emile never seemed to like to speak of his wife’s relations. In fact, I understood him to say that he never allowed any of them to enter his house or to visit her, so I imagined that he had married beneath him,’ observed Mrs Mathers.

‘Well, the De Carneys are of noble ancestry, so that in a way she was not his equal; but that was not the trouble. Before I tell you, however, I must beg that it will go no farther, Mabel.’

‘Oh Isabel, do not burden me with any more secrets! I do not wish to be unkind; but if you knew the awkward situations into which my last promise to you has led me you would understand my feelings,’ cried Mrs Mathers.

‘Well, as a matter of fact it is the same secret, as you call it, though I really do not know why it should be a burden to you. If you had only one whom you looked upon as a son, and who loved you as a mother, you would understand my feelings, and how I dread his being told that I am not his real mother, and have no right to his love as such!’ exclaimed Madame de Carney with some bitterness.

‘Have no right to his love,’ protested Mrs Mathers, ‘when you know that in all probability he owes his life to your care! I never thought



'Do be careful, Maurice; you'll stretch the net.'



you would rear him when I first saw him. No mother could have done more for him, and no mother deserves a son's love more than you do Maurice's. I do not believe it would make any difference to him if he knew the truth.'

'Do not speak of such a thing! It would hurt him dreadfully. You would rob him at one blow of his cousins, his aunt, and his mother, for he loves you next best after me; and it would never be the same, much as you might try to make him think you looked upon him as a relative. Besides, you promised long ago not to tell any one Maurice was not my son. Surely, after keeping your own counsel for seventeen years, you can do so for my lifetime. After I am dead you can do as you like,' said Madame de Carney.

'I shall keep my promise, of course; but what is this further mystery? I hope the first marriage was quite legal. If not, I really think you had better consult some one. I could not promise to conceal that fact. He would not be the heir to this property,' said her sister.

'No, no, it is nothing of that sort. The marriage was quite in order, and the family very superior; but—she was a German. Her father was a General.'

'What a relief! Then why did Emile object to them so much?' asked Mrs Mathers.

Madame de Carney smiled. 'You would not ask that question if you had lived in France as long as I have! Emile, like all

good Frenchmen, hated the Germans, and would not have in his house any one who had fought against his country. This man was rather a well-known General, and Emile told me once it was gall and wormwood to him to think that Maurice's grandfather had led his troops against Paris. Now you see why less than ever I can tell Maurice the truth about his parentage.'

'If Emile felt so strongly about it, I rather wonder that he married a German girl,' remarked Mrs Mathers.

'He fell in love with a beautiful face, and she loved him so much that she took his country for hers, and was quite content to renounce her family and Fatherland at his bidding. She might have missed them more if she had lived ; but, you see, she died before the first year of her married life was out, and left Maurice a tiny baby,' explained Madame de Carney.

'How is it that this German uncle has turned up now, after seventeen years ? And what does he want ?' demanded Mrs Mathers.

'I don't know. He said he was travelling in France, and thought he would like to make the acquaintance of his sister's son. He was a very pleasant man, a lieutenant-colonel in the Prussian army ; and when I explained to him that Maurice did not know of his existence he was quite sympathetic, and thanked me with tears in his eyes for having been a mother to him. He went away without seeing

Maurice ; but it gave me a shock, especially as I hear he is staying in the neighbourhood.'

'Oh, well, if he is a gentleman he will respect your wishes, and not trouble you again,' said Mrs Mathers ; and the subject was dropped by common consent.

CHAPTER III.

THE NYMPHS' FOUNTAIN.

IRENE and her companion meanwhile had thrown themselves down on two hammocks under the trees, Maurice with the grace that was natural to him, while Irene, as usual, looked lanky and ungraceful. She was at an awkward age, and did not know what to do with her arms and legs, though she gave promise of being a handsome, well-built woman in a few years.

At present she was swinging her long legs over the side of the hammock in a way which, to tell the truth, rather offended Maurice's sense of propriety; but as he feared that she would get up and leave him if he said so, he made no remark.

'When you are a man, Maurice, what are you going to do?' demanded Irene abruptly.

Maurice raised his eyebrows. 'I should say that it was obvious. I shall care for my property,' he remarked.

'But that won't give you much to do. You have a land-agent, and you don't care twopence about farming or hunting or shooting,' protested Irene.

'Nevertheless there is always something to do on a property like this. Besides, I shall not live here all the year. I shall have an

apartment at Paris. Ah, Paris! I adore it,' said Maurice.

'Fancy living in a town when you have a beautiful place like this to live in! I should never want to leave it if it were mine,' cried Irene impulsively.

Maurice shot a glance at her, which Irene, who was looking at the château, did not catch, fortunately. Seeing how unconscious the girl was, Maurice only observed in his graceful, courteous way, 'I am glad you like it. I too like it better when you and Aunt Mabel are here. Alone, with no brothers or sisters, it is a little *triste* for mamma and me. Papa had no brothers either, only sisters, who are not married, so I have no young relatives but you.'

'And a good thing, too. I should be sure to hate them,' announced Irene, sending the hammock swinging with a kick of her foot.

'You would hate whom? My young relatives? And why, might I ask?' inquired Maurice.

'Because I can't stand French people. You need not be offended, Maurice; you are half English, you know, and I loved Uncle Emile though he was French. But I should hate French girls and boys,' explained Irene.

'That is *drôle*, for, so far as I know, you are not acquainted with any,' said Maurice dryly.

'I am. There's a French girl at our school, and she spends her time powdering her face

and arranging the bow on her hair,' announced Irene.

'Then she is not *bien élevée*—well brought up, you call it. No one powders in public; it is not *comme il faut*,' declared Maurice.

'Oh, well, it is only at school, so I suppose she does not consider it public. Anyway, I don't like her,' said Irene.

'There may even be one girl in England whom I should not like; but I should not make up my mind to hate all English girls in consequence. I can assure you there are some nice French people, in spite of their having the misfortune not to own one drop of English blood,' observed Maurice to tease her. And he had just said this, when he sat up with alacrity and exclaimed, '*Tiens*, how strange! There are visitors. Irene, you had better return to your mother. If you will pardon me, I will retire through the woods before they observe my presence.'

Irene looked down the drive, and saw coming in at the massive iron gates a motor-car with two ladies and a boy, so far as she could see at that distance. 'What a coward! Fancy running away from visitors! But you are going to do no such thing! I am not going to be left to entertain your friends by myself and talk my bad French,' she cried, holding Maurice by the arm to prevent his escape.

'But no, Irene, I will return immediately. It is only that it is better that we should not

be found together without a chaperon,' protested Maurice.

Irene involuntarily let go of Maurice's sleeve. He promptly escaped, and plunged into the wood which skirted the lawns on one side.

'Of all the stupid ideas I ever heard, you have the very stupidest, Maurice; and I'll never come and sit under these trees again with you as long as I am here—so there!' Irene shouted after him.

Maurice turned, and, looking at her from behind a tree, said, 'You are most unreasonable. I only wish to show you respect. But do, I beg you, go to the house and join your mother,' he urged.

'I will not stir. Go and see your friends yourself; and if they come here I shall tell them you were lying in that hammock, and ran away and hid from them when you saw their car, because you were ashamed of being seen here with me,' announced Irene.

Maurice groaned. 'You are impossible, quite impossible!' said he, and disappeared among the trees.

Irene kept her word, and lay in her hammock, swinging it to and fro and singing to herself, at the same time carefully avoiding looking towards the château, so that she should not have to go if her mother waved to her to come and see the visitors.

Maurice, meanwhile, had made a detour, and arrived at the château to find the owner of the next property, his wife, son, and daughter

sitting on chairs in the drawing-room, talking to Madame de Carney and Mrs Mathers.

‘Ah, here is my son!’ cried Madame de Carney, presenting him to the new-comers, and adding, ‘And where is your cousin?—They have been playing tennis on the lawn in front of these windows, and were resting under the trees to cool themselves; but I fear they have quarrelled, as usual. My English niece has very decided opinions.’

‘Ah yes! English ladies have very decided opinions at the present day,’ agreed the Frenchman, who clearly disapproved of the views of present-day Englishwomen.

‘Mademoiselle my cousin was offended with my opinions shortly after I had installed her in a hammock, and I left her and retired to walk in the woods. She was within sight of her mother, so that I had no scruples about deserting her,’ said Maurice.

Mrs Mathers looked at him doubtfully. She had been watching Irene in her hammock, and had noticed Maurice’s sudden disappearance as soon as he saw the car. It crossed her mind that his statement, if not inaccurate, was misleading, but it was not actually untrue, and she knew quite enough of French etiquette and strictness about chaperons to appreciate Maurice’s tactful remark about their having been in sight of a chaperon.

‘Run and fetch her, Maurice. Tell her that there is a young French demoiselle whose acquaintance I wish her to make. I should

fancy they are about the same age,' said Mrs Mathers to him with a smile.

Maurice smiled back as he replied, 'I will go with pleasure; but I am not sure that I am a good ambassador to send, being in disfavour with the queen. If I may suggest, it is a pretty walk through the wood to the nymphs' fountain; if madame will allow her son and mademoiselle her daughter to come with me we could visit it together. I think they have not seen the fountains. Is it not so?'

Madame de Carney looked at her visitor for her permission, which was gracefully granted, and the trio went off together to Irene, who was carefully lying with her back towards the château, but who, to Maurice's secret relief, had stopped swinging, and had gathered her long legs into the hammock.

It was characteristic of the boy that he hurried forward so as to help Irene out of the hammock and prevent her tumbling out in the ungraceful way she generally did.

But Irene was nothing if not surprising, and as she heard their voices she gave a leap, a kind of gymnastic performance—she was very good at gymnastics—and stood before them, her golden-brown hair in a tangle over her face, and her skirt twisted round her, by the exertion.

Mademoiselle Marie du Chesne uttered a little cry of alarm, and drew back a step.

Irene gave a laugh, tossed back her hair,

and, giving her skirt a careless shake into shape, came forward with outstretched hand before Maurice had managed to present in proper form Mademoiselle and Monsieur Jean du Chesne (pronounced Shane). Jean received a frown from Maurice when he grasped Irene's hand instead of making her a stiff bow with heels together.

'How do you do? I am very glad to see you. Maurice tells me I shall like French girls and boys when I know them. I only know one French girl, and I dislike her,' announced Irene brusquely in French, which she spoke very well.

'Irene, I beg of you, do not shock our guests,' said Maurice in English, for which breach of good manners he apologised to the visitors.

'It is no matter; I speak a little English,' replied the girl, walking on beside Irene, who towered above her, and at whom she looked as if she were a curiosity.

Irene stopped to let the two boys overtake them. 'You are very tall for a Frenchman. Are you partly English?' she said to Jean du Chesne.

Jean du Chesne, who evidently admired Irene and her boyish manners, joined her and said, 'I regret to say I have not that honour.'

Irene turned sharply upon her companion. 'You regret not being half English? Well, I can't return the compliment, for I should hate to be half French,' she said bluntly.

‘I regret that too,’ he replied politely, and turned the conversation by remarking on the beauty of the trees in the wood through which they were passing.

Irene felt rather ashamed of herself. She had meant to snub Jean for saying polite things which she was sure he did not mean, but she saw that she had hurt his feelings, and, impulsive as ever, she cried, ‘I wish I were French in one thing, and that is politeness. I can’t think how you manage always to be polite.’

Jean laughed. ‘But we do not, I assure you. French people can be very rude at times.’

‘Well, I only know one French girl in England; and even when she wants to be nasty she does it quite politely,’ argued Irene.

‘I think it is a difference in character. As a nation we dislike seeing or giving pain, and we prefer saying a pleasant thing to an unpleasant one; but it has its drawbacks, as it leads one to sacrifice truth occasionally,’ said Jean.

Irene stared at her companion in surprise. ‘Fancy your thinking that out at your age!’ she exclaimed.

Jean laughed outright. ‘I am not so young as you think, perhaps, mademoiselle. I am eighteen, and begin my military service at the end of this month.’

‘Ah, you are going to be a soldier! I wish

I were a man. I should so like to be a soldier. I love a fight.'

When Mademoiselle Marie du Chesne heard her brother laugh she hurried her steps. It did not please her at all that this rude English girl should be on such good terms with Jean, nor did she consider it *convenable* of her to run on ahead with an utter stranger in that way; so she said to Maurice, 'I wonder what is amusing them. Shall we overtake them and share the joke?'

'By all means,' said Maurice, who did not approve of Irene's behaviour; and they hurried on just in time to hear Irene announcing her desire to be a soldier, as she loved a fight.

'But you need not be a soldier for that—in England at least. You can be a Suffragette, and wrestle with the gendarmes, though it is not becoming. I have seen pictures of your English ladies in a truly deplorable state after one of their fights,' announced Marie with veiled disgust.

'They are fighting for a principle, and for that I respect them; but I have no desire to be a Suffragette. I don't like women to fight. I don't even shoot when I go out with the guns at home,' replied Irene.

'Then why do you go out with a gun?' demanded Marie, misunderstanding the expression.

Irene explained, and Jean and Maurice sauntered on together.

'You must not misjudge my cousin. In

England young ladies are allowed to say and do many things that would not be *convenable* in France,' Maurice explained to his companion.

'Oh, you need not apologise, De Carney. I have met English people before, and I am always entreating mamma to bring Marie up *à l'Anglaise*; but she is too old-fashioned, and has not the courage to do so,' declared Jean.

'I cannot agree with you. Much as I like my young cousin, I often regret that she is not French, or at least has not been brought up as French girls are,' replied Maurice.

'It would spoil mademoiselle your cousin. To me the charm of the English girl is her unself-conscious way of talking to any one. I like her fearless, straightforward gaze. One feels that one can trust a person who looks at you like that, and "calls a spade a spade," as the English proverb has it,' observed Jean.

Maurice laughed. 'You are quoting my cousin. That is just what she said this morning,' he replied.

'I can believe it. She is a young lady who would never tell a lie. I should believe her under any circumstances,' said Jean earnestly.

Presently they heard a cry of admiration from Marie, and found themselves in front of the nymphs' fountain, or, rather, fountains, one of the show spots of Château Carney.

'It is beautiful, just perfect! You are fortunate to own such a magnificent work of art,' Marie said to Maurice with enthusiasm.

‘I am enchanted that it meets with your approval, mademoiselle,’ Maurice replied.

‘I think the nymphs are hideous, and it spoils this lovely wood to have an artificial affair like this in it,’ announced Irene.

‘I think it is rather a happy blending of nature and art. See, mademoiselle, the sides of the fountain are overgrown with lovely moss, and the nymphs are wood-nymphs, and so are the fauns. With a little imagination one can figure them whispering the secrets of the woods to each other, as they lean in those graceful attitudes listening to nature,’ said Jean.

Maurice, whose face had fallen at Irene’s sharp criticism, brightened at Jean’s tactful words, and Irene for the second time looked very much ashamed of herself.

CHAPTER IV.

IRENE'S MANNERS.

‘O H, well, my children, how did you enjoy your visit, and what do you think of the heir to Château Carney?’ inquired Madame du Chesne, as they drove out of the gates after prolonged and effusive partings and compliments.

‘He is charming,’ they said in concert, and then both stopped for a moment, till Marie continued, ‘and the château and grounds are *ravissants*; but the English cousin, she is impossible—so *gauche*! And her manners—none! I assure you, mamma, she is a perfect savage, and so rude to her nice cousin!’

‘You do not understand English manners. She is just a little too frank and outspoken,’ said Jean.

‘A little too frank! I should say so, and I do not wish to understand such manners. She shocked me greatly.—I am glad, mamma, you have not brought me up *à l’Anglaise*, if that is a specimen of such upbringing,’ cried Marie, shrugging her shoulders.

‘A very handsome young woman I call her, or, rather, she will be in a few years,’ said the father.

And to this his wife agreed, adding, ‘I have asked them all to spend the day with us next

week. We are near neighbours, and it is only kind. Besides, the properties touch at one point; it is as well to be on good terms with one's next-door neighbour. Maurice is a charming youth, and very rich, though he does not resemble either his father or mother,' she said.

'I thought him very like'—— began Monsieur du Chesne, and then broke off abruptly.

'Like whom? His mother? I could see no likeness. She has blue eyes and he has brown. In fact, I said so to her, and she agreed, and said he resembled relatives on the other side of the family. I fancy it hurt her. She seemed vexed that he was not more English in appearance.'

'Ah,' he observed, 'it is not wise to make personal remarks.' But he said no more, and Madame du Chesne had no idea that her husband had been going to say that Maurice was very like his real mother, of whose existence she had never heard, but whom Monsieur du Chesne had met when in the same regiment as Monsieur de Carney. Indeed, he had been one of the few guests at Monsieur de Carney's first marriage. He had kept his own counsel as to the nationality of his friend's wife at Monsieur de Carney's request; and as he was very seldom at his country place, he had never seen Maurice before. Now, however, he recognised at once his likeness to the beautiful brown-eyed girl he had seen as a bride, and



Nobody saw a mischievous face peeping out from behind a tree.



whose death had so crushed, as he thought, her young husband.

‘I think I am more English than De Carney,’ said Jean after a pause.

‘Then I will thank you not to be so. Barbarians that they are! What men can see in them, great gawky lamp-posts, I cannot imagine!’ cried Marie with some temper, for she had not overlooked the fact that both her brother and Maurice had paid more attention to Irene than to her, and had found her more interesting than herself.

Both the men present smiled, and her father said, ‘Beware of the green-eyed monster, Marie! Nothing is so unbecoming to a young woman as envy, hatred, and malice.’

‘Marie has no need to be jealous of Miss Mathers. She may be a fine woman one day, but at present she is an awkward, badly behaved little girl,’ said madame.

‘Little!’ exclaimed Monsieur du Chesney.

‘I meant that she was very young and undeveloped at present. It is a great misfortune for a woman to be tall. English women always look so overgrown and ungainly,’ declared Madame du Chesne; and neither her husband nor her son cared to contradict her or point out that both Mrs Mathers and her sister, though tall, were very graceful women, and in no way ungainly or awkward-looking.

The visit of the Du Chesnes was returned,

as arranged, the next week; but when the party were ready to start Irene was nowhere to be found.

‘Dear me, how tiresome! It is our first visit to them for many years, and it will be so impolite if we arrive late for *déjeuner*,’ exclaimed Madame de Carney with vexation.

‘Have you seen Irene?’ Mrs Mathers asked Maurice.

‘I saw my cousin after breakfast, and suggested her resting so as not to fatigue herself for this expedition; but she insisted upon playing tennis, and, as usual, was annoyed with my bad play, and went off saying she was busy about something,’ replied Maurice.

Mrs Mathers looked at him with a puzzled expression. Maurice’s explanations often seemed to her to be very roundabout, and she suspected him of making them so on purpose to avoid a direct answer or to conceal something. ‘You don’t know where she is now?’ she inquired.

‘I have no idea,’ he replied promptly.

‘I hope she is not keeping out of the way on purpose. She is quite capable of it,’ said Irene’s mother, who knew her daughter’s ways.

‘She would never do anything so—so rude and disobedient,’ cried Madame de Carney indignantly.

‘Here is the car,’ said Maurice, and ran down to it.

Somehow Mrs Mathers guessed that this

was just what Irene was doing, and that Maurice knew it, but had been told by Irene not to tell; and yet Mrs Mathers felt that it was unlike Irene to leave no message, and to keep them waiting and searching for her till they were made late for their visit.

However, the fact remained that the car was at the door and they were all waiting, and that Irene was nowhere to be found. Meanwhile Maurice, after some conversation with the chauffeur, sent him up the steps to the terrace, where Mrs Mathers and her sister stood undecided what to do.

‘You and Maurice had better go without us, Isabel. It will never do for us to be late. You must make our excuses, and say that I am very disappointed,’ said Mrs Mathers, just as the chauffeur, taking off his hat, handed his mistress a note.

‘It is from—Irene,’ began Madame de Carney, in surprise.

But her sister interrupted her anxiously. ‘From Irene! But how? What has happened to her?’ she cried, fearing all sorts of evils, as wild thoughts of kidnapping passed through her brain.

‘Happened to her? Nothing has happened to her! What harm could come to her in our own grounds? The only thing that is the matter is that she has coolly gone for a walk by herself, and fears she will not be back in time, so begs us to go without her, and make her apologies to Monsieur and Madame

du Chesne. It is most tiresome of the child !' cried her aunt.

'How did you get the note? Where did you last see Mademoiselle Mathers?' Mrs Mathers asked the chauffeur.

'Madame, I have not seen mademoiselle at all. I found this note pinned to my coat when I went to the garage to fetch the car. It may have been there ten minutes or two hours, for I have been engaged on the repairs of the green car all the morning, and mademoiselle may easily have slipped in at any time while I was so occupied. The car was making such a noise at times that I could have heard nothing, and while my head was under it have seen nothing,' the man declared with much gesticulation.

Mrs Mathers hesitated as to whether she should go or not, and finally decided to do so. 'We had better start at once, Isabel, or we shall be late. It is no use worrying about Irene. She has given me her promise not to go beyond the grounds by herself, so I know she is safe; but we might search for her for hours before finding her, and she would not be dressed then, to say nothing of her humour, which appears to be a bad one at present,' she declared.

'You spoil her, you and her brothers. In fact, I think every one spoils her, and you will probably be sorry for it one day. Personally, I should be afraid to leave her alone on a day like this; it looks odd, too. I shall leave you

to explain her absence as best you can,' replied her sister, as she followed Mrs Mathers into the car; while Maurice, having helped them in, tucked them up, and seen that footstools, veils, and everything were comfortable, jumped in beside the driver.

CHAPTER V.

MAURICE'S UNCLE.

NOBODY saw a mischievous face, under a mass of tangled golden-brown hair, peeping out from behind a tree, unless indeed it was Maurice, who cast a glance in the direction of the woods, and then averted his head and looked straight in front of him.

When the car swung out of the gates, which had the initials C. de C. in gilt letters woven into the elaborate wrought-iron design, Irene came out from the woods, and with a merry laugh strode across the lawns to the château. Up the steps leading to the terrace she ran lightly, to encounter the major-domo of the château, who looked at her with mingled surprise and disapproval.

‘Mademoiselle has not gone with mesdames and monsieur?’ he inquired politely, but with a grave face.

‘Now, how could I be gone when I am standing here in the flesh? Do I look like a ghost?’ demanded Irene, smiling at him.

‘No, mademoiselle. I was only surprised to find you here. Madame Mathers will have been much alarmed and distressed at your disappearance,’ he protested.

‘*Eh bien*, Louis, it does not look like it, since she has gone off very happily to enjoy

herself in spite of my disappearance. Now, will you please order the cook to make me some sandwiches, and give me some fruit, as I am going to picnic in the woods?’ asked Irene.

But this was too much for old Louis, whose sense of propriety was quite shocked, as indeed was often the case while Irene was at the château. ‘Picnic! Have your *déjeuner* in the woods alone, out of sight of the château! It is impossible for a young lady alone. Allow me to serve a nice *déjeuner* in the dining-room, or even here on the terrace,’ he suggested in a conciliatory tone.

‘No, no, that is far too dull. I want to go as far as I can from the château,’ cried Irene.

‘Then, mademoiselle, be advised by me, and let me bring round the green car and take you to Monsieur du Chesne’s villa. It is now in good order, and runs fast. I can tell the man to have it ready’—looking at his watch—‘and we can still be in time for the *déjeuner* at your friends’. You can say that you mistook the time strolling about the garden, and were desolated to find your parent gone without you; but that you were so anxious to go to see them that you persuaded me to take you in the other car. Come, mademoiselle,’ urged the old man.

‘Louis, where do you expect to go, and cause me to go, if you tempt me to tell such a tissue of falsehoods?’ demanded Irene.

‘Mademoiselle, I expect to go to the

Château du Chesne to-day. After that I will trust in *le bon Dieu*,' retorted old Louis.

'You do not seem to trust *le bon Dieu* to look after me if I am out of sight of the château. However, we English have more faith, and I am going to spend the day in the woods. If you will not give me any food I must live upon worms and berries, like the birds,' announced Irene.

'But no, I will give you the best we have in the house, as you know. Célestine shall pack a basket, and a boy shall carry it to whatever point you wish, mademoiselle,' replied the old man, abandoning further attempts to induce Irene to be *convenable*.

Irene smiled to herself at the old man's obvious attempt to supply her with a guardian in the shape of a boy to carry her basket; but, not wishing to vex the old man further, she agreed to his proposal; and presently one of the young men she had often seen about the grounds came up with a basket, and, raising his hat, said, 'My father has desired me to place myself at mademoiselle's disposal.'

'Oh, well, find me a nice mossy dell to lunch in, near a stream or spring if possible,' said Irene, smiling again to find that old Louis had sent his own son to guard her.

The young man, who told her his name was Gaston, related to her how his forefathers had served the De Carneys for generations. 'It is due to ancestors of my own that the château is still occupied by a De Carney. At

the time of the great Revolution Monsieur and Madame de Carney were guillotined, and my great-great-grandfather too for hiding them. My great-great-grandmother took the only child, a baby boy, and brought him up as her own, and used the château for the citizens, and so saved it. Afterwards, by influence, and his Radical views, which my great-grandmother had taught him for the time being, he got his property back again.'

'He ought to have shared it with your family,' cried Irene.

Gaston listened to her in mild amazement. 'It was the property of the De Carneys. My great-grandparents only did their duty to their seigneur; and, indeed, they have always been very good and grateful to our family. No one of our family lacks anything, or ever will, while there is a De Carney at Château Carney,' he replied.

'That is a very interesting story, Gaston. I never heard it before. I wonder, if there came another revolution, whether you would do the same for Monsieur de Carney?' said Irene.

'I hope there will not be a revolution again. I do not think it likely; but if there were, I should certainly do my duty to my seigneur,' said Gaston, at the same time holding back overhanging branches of trees and clearing obstacles out of Irene's path as they made their way through a part of the woods that she had never been in before.

‘What are you going to be, Gaston?’ inquired Irene, who had never seen him doing anything, and knew he was too superior to be a servant or a gardener.

‘I shall follow my father as overseer of the château, I hope, when I return from my military service,’ said Gaston.

‘I wonder, once you have been a soldier, that you do not want to remain one. It must be a dull life at the château for a young man after a soldier’s life,’ said Irene.

Gaston shrugged his shoulders. ‘It is not amusing to be a soldier in peace-time; but if there is war, then I shall be there to fight for La France,’ he said, throwing back his shoulders with pride in his voice.

‘Would you fight against England, Gaston?’ asked Irene slyly.

‘No, no, there is no fear of that! There is an *entente cordiale* between us; but we have one foe whom I hope to live to fight—the accursed Germans,’ he said fiercely.

‘I rather like Germans. We have a Fräulein at school, who is the most good-natured teacher there, and she likes England so much that she stays even in the holidays. Why do you dislike Germans?’ asked Irene.

‘You ask me why! You would not ask if you had suffered as my father suffered in the last war, and heard how they overran this village and looted this castle; and the horrors’——cried Gaston, and broke off, fearing he was harrowing Irene’s feelings.

But that light-hearted young person only said, 'You ought to forget all that, Gaston. It is past now, and you are at peace. In war one does all sorts of things that are not right. I dare say the French looted and did horrors too.'

'Never! They have more heart. They are not like those Prussians. We can never forget or be at peace till we have won back Alsace and Lorraine!' exclaimed Gaston with vehemence. Then, calming down, he added, 'Here, mademoiselle, is a beautiful spot, with a spring close by. It is the best water on the property, so cool and refreshing. I shall spread the rug and arrange your lunch with your permission.'

'Very well; this looks like a haunt of the fairies. When you have done that you need not stay; you will want your own lunch,' said Irene.

'I have it in my knapsack; but I shall not intrude on you. I have to visit the fountains and see if a slight repair has been done properly, and shall be back in an hour. I can take you to another curious sight—a grotto, which, however, Monsieur Maurice will never visit; he got a fright there when a child. It is worth seeing. Meanwhile I shall be within call if you will just blow this whistle. It would reassure my father of your safety,' said Gaston.

'What do you suppose could hurt me? However, I will take it. I promise to

whistle if a robber appears,' said Irene with a laugh.

'I do not fear robbers, but a viper or a wasp might annoy you, and I might then be of use,' replied Gaston, after which he raised his hat and disappeared among the trees.

Irene was of an independent nature, and did not know what fear meant; but, to her own surprise, no sooner had Gaston disappeared than she felt a sudden desire to call him back, and a rustling in the trees made her heart beat.

'It's conscience!' she thought to herself. 'I ought to have gone to spend the day with that horrid Marie, and my conscience is pricking me for backing out of it, and probably vexing mother;' and with this acknowledgment of her misdeed to herself she eased her conscience, as she thought, and set to on the very excellent lunch old Louis had sent for her.

There were provided a plate, knife, fork, glass, a bottle of lemonade, the wing of a chicken, salad, and fruit. Irene was carrying a morsel of the chicken to her mouth, when she was startled by a violent sneeze. She turned abruptly, and saw the face of a man close behind her. In a moment she had seized the whistle, and was about to carry it to her mouth, when a voice said in excellent though guttural English, as the man's hand held her arm so as to prevent her using the whistle, 'Pardon me, I will do you no harm. I am a relation of Monsieur de Carney, and I have a right to be here. There is no need to

blow that whistle. You are as safe with me as with Maurice—safer perhaps, for I doubt if he could defend you as well as I.’

After the man had spoken Irene felt no more fear. He was evidently a gentleman. When she let the whistle drop in her agitation he came from behind her, and she saw that he was a man of about forty, fair-haired and blue-eyed, with rather a good-humoured face, now that he had got his way; though there remained with Irene an unpleasant recollection of the gleam in his eye which quelled her for the moment and made her drop her whistle.

She had recovered herself now, and replied with spirit, ‘I don’t know who you are, or how you are related to my cousin Maurice de Carney; but you certainly have no right to be hiding in his grounds or to seize my hands.’

‘I apologise most profusely for the liberty I took. I was anxious for your own sake that you should not recall your attendant, and I assumed that, being English, you would not scream or be frightened at the sight of a man,’ said the stranger.

‘How did you know I was English?’ demanded Irene.

The stranger smiled. ‘That is easy to see. You are not offended that I say you look English? Moreover, no French young lady would dream of picnicking in a wood alone instead of going for a motor drive to some friends,’ he observed.

Irene eyed him with suspicion. ‘You seem

to know a great deal about us. How are you related to the De Carneys? My mother's only sister is Madame de Carney, and I never heard that Maurice had any near relatives but us. In fact, I have heard my aunt say that his only French relatives were an old cousin of his father's and two maiden aunts,' she objected.

The stranger smiled a disagreeable smile. 'That is quite true. Maurice has no near French relatives; but I do not happen to be French, and I am his uncle,' he said.

'Maurice's uncle! You can't be; at least'—as the stranger still stood there and smiled in a confident manner, looking down upon her in a way that irritated her immensely, though it was perfectly respectful—'how can you be? Uncle Emile was French, and my aunt is English, and you are certainly not English. Are you German?' wound up Irene abruptly.

The stranger took off his hat almost reverently. 'I have that honour,' he said; 'but nevertheless I am uncle to Maurice de Carney, who is the son of my dead sister Gretchen.'

Irene stared open-mouthed at the speaker, who was so evidently speaking the truth. All she said was, 'It is impossible! Maurice is my cousin—my aunt Isabel's son.'

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRUSSIAN.

‘IT is impossible!’ she kept saying to herself, and yet, as she looked at the man, something in his smile and the way his mouth twitched reminded her of Maurice, though Maurice was dark-haired and brown-eyed, while this man was blonde; and Irene knew in her heart that this extraordinary thing which she had been told was true.

‘It is surprising, no doubt, and it will come as a shock to you that your young companion is no relation to you; but it is true; I assure you of that fact on my honour as a Prussian officer,’ he observed.

‘I wonder you come here after the damage your fellow-countrymen did in the last war! Now I understand why you hide in your nephew’s grounds, and I shall whistle to my attendant if you do not go away directly. He hates Prussians, and if my aunt does not invite you to come here you have no business to be here,’ cried Irene.

The intruder did not budge, though he kept an eye upon the whistle as he replied coolly, ‘You may whistle if you wish to do so; but I warn you that if you betray my presence you will oblige me to announce myself, and disclose my relationship to Maurice, which I

have promised your aunt not to do in her lifetime.'

Irene's hand, which had stretched down towards the whistle, was arrested on the way. 'I don't understand. Does my aunt know that Maurice is not her son really?' she asked, bewildered.

'Naturally. She saw him first when he was a baby of a few weeks old; but she loves him as if he were her own, and I am grateful to her for her care, and would not distress her by robbing her of her son, as, in a way, I should do if I told him the truth,' said Maurice's uncle.

'I wonder why'—— began Irene. She was going to say that she wondered why her aunt had not told Maurice the truth before; but it flashed across her mind that her aunt's jealous affection for Maurice was one reason, and that a dislike to own that he was half German was another, for Madame de Carney hated the Germans in a way that Irene had never been able to understand. She understood now, and was silent.

'And now, mademoiselle, permit me to apologise for having interrupted you at your lunch. I will not longer intrude upon you; but before I go I should like to caution you about mentioning my visit,' he said.

'I shall certainly inform my aunt. Whoever you are, you have no right to trespass in these grounds without leave, and it looks very suspicious that you should choose a day when



She turned abruptly, and saw the face of a man.

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you evidently knew that everybody would be away,' retorted Irene.

A flush rose to the stranger's forehead as he said proudly, 'I am doing nothing of which I need be ashamed, and it cannot hurt *me* if you tell the whole world who I am, and that I had the curiosity to visit my nephew's grounds in his absence, when they know that the sole reason I do not come openly and announce myself and claim my right to visit my dead sister's son is to please the whim of his English step-mother. You will hurt her; but that is your own affair. Mademoiselle, I salute you.' The man drew his heels together smartly with a click, took off his hat, and stood with it almost touching the ground, then turned and disappeared among the trees with a long, striding step.

Irene—exactly why she did not know—rose to her feet and stood looking after him, half inclined to whistle for Gaston; but as she stood there she heard his steps and saw him advancing towards her. He looked very grave, as he said politely, 'Do you wish to visit the grotto, mademoiselle?'

'Oh Gaston, are you back already? I have not eaten my lunch yet,' cried Irene.

'The time has passed quickly, then? It is an hour since I left,' said Gaston dryly, and Irene felt herself growing hot at something in the man's tone.

'Yes. I—a man has been here talking to me,' she said, stumbling over the explanation

as she remembered that she could not say who he was.

Gaston looked at her more kindly, but still gravely, as he said, 'A friend of yours, mademoiselle?'

'Oh dear no, an enemy—that is to say, I can't say anything about him,' she replied, looking rather uncomfortable, for Irene was a most outspoken person, and hated anything clandestine, and for the first time in her life she found herself unable to speak the truth.

Gaston, naturally, could not understand this, but was too polite to make any remark about Irene's doings, of which, as a Frenchman, he highly disapproved, even when he thought she wanted to escape a dull visit and to picnic alone. Now that he believed she had stayed at home to meet a strange man he disapproved still more, and of this Irene was aware.

'I don't think I care about visiting the grotto to-day, Gaston. I will go back to the château with you, if you will take me. I don't think I shall walk in French woods alone again,' she said with a short laugh.

'That is a very wise resolution of yours, mademoiselle, and I should say it applied to woods in any country for a young lady. But you have not eaten any lunch,' protested Gaston, as Irene was turning to go home, leaving her lunch on the ground.

'I don't care for that either,' said Irene impatiently.

‘But you will be faint. Allow me to pour out some lemonade. When one is annoyed the appetite goes and the palate becomes dry. Drink a little of this, and I will refresh the salad in the spring,’ said Gaston; and presently Irene found herself enjoying her lunch in spite of her late disagreeable experience.

Gaston brought back the salad from the spring with a perplexed frown on his face, but said nothing until Irene had finished her lunch. Meanwhile he disappeared, and seemed to be investigating something in the woods behind her. Seeing that she had finished her meal, he now came forward. ‘Your acquaintance is a surveyor perhaps, and is interested in this property?’ he inquired.

‘Yes; but I can’t tell you anything about him except that he knows Madame de Carney, and that she does not wish him to come to the château or to be spoken about,’ said Irene.

Gaston raised his eyebrows. ‘And yet you meet him secretly in the grounds? I fear it will be my duty to tell madame of his visit, mademoiselle,’ he observed.

‘If you do you will be sorry for it, and you will only upset her. And I did not meet him secretly. I had no idea he would be here. How dare you suspect me of such a thing?’ cried Irene indignantly.

But Gaston took no notice of her indignation. ‘Perhaps, then, I had better tell Monsieur Maurice?’ he suggested.

This was just what Irene did not want, and

she exclaimed, 'No, no, whatever you do you must not tell my cou—Monsieur Maurice;' and the tears came to her eyes as she remembered that Maurice was not her cousin. She scolded him, and quarrelled with him, and in her heart thought him unmanly compared with her own brothers; but she had been taught to call him cousin, and had spent many happy days playing with him as a little child, and this news had brought a sense of loss.

Gaston, being a tender-hearted Frenchman, could not bear to see a girl in tears; so, though he could not understand this business at all, and still thought it very forward and not at all *convenable* of Irene to behave as she had done, even though she was English, and therefore probably meant no harm, he tried to console her. '*Eh bien*, mademoiselle! I will not speak of the visit of this Englishman.'

'Englishman! He is not English,' cried Irene impulsively.

'I beg your pardon. I thought he certainly spoke English, and he is not French. However, we will forget him if you will promise not to walk in these woods alone again. It is not wise, mademoiselle,' replied Gaston.

'I promise that! Nothing would induce me to run the risk of meeting that man again!' exclaimed Irene with such vehemence that Gaston was convinced that either this was a chance meeting, or that Irene was trying to get rid of a family enemy, whom he still believed to be English, or perhaps Scottish,

which would account for Irene's repudiating him as a fellow-countryman.

'That is well, then ; and you may be assured that if I find him trespassing or investigating our springs'—— Here a thought flashed into his mind, and he gave a sharp glance at Irene as he said, 'I should like to know why he was so interested in our supply of water.'

'I don't suppose he was interested in it. He was probably drinking it, and then I came and sat down before it, and he could not get away without being seen, and so he had to make himself known to me. I wish I had never seen him !' cried Irene, thinking of the information he had given her.

'He would not need to bring instruments with him to drink water from a spring, nor need he trample the grass down as he has done for that purpose. However, I shall soon satisfy myself on that point,' said Gaston as he escorted Irene to the château, which she did not leave again until the others returned from their visit to the Du Chesnes.

Old Louis brought her tea himself. 'You have enjoyed yourself and your solitary picnic, mademoiselle ?' he inquired.

'No, I have not. I am sorry I did not go with the others, and I met a stranger in the grounds who annoyed me, so I am never going for a walk there alone, you will be glad to hear. France is not like England. One can walk about in one's own grounds there without any fear,' declared Irene.

Nothing but old Louis's natural politeness restrained him from interrupting Irene, so great was his agitation at hearing of her unpleasant encounter.

'*Mon Dieu*, mademoiselle! a stranger annoyed you in these grounds! But where was Gaston? How could he leave you, the *misérable*, when I instructed him so particularly not to let you out of his sight?' cried old Louis, too much disturbed by this fact to think of protesting against her remarks about the superior safety of English parks.

'He did not go far away, and he left me a whistle to call him if I wanted him,' said Irene, too honest to let Gaston be blamed unjustly.

'Ah! then you whistled for him, and he came to your assistance, of course? But how strange that Gaston has never mentioned this grave occurrence to me! And what has happened to the man? He has not escaped?' asked Louis.

Poor Irene found herself in a dilemma, and, not choosing to tell the true facts or to prevaricate, she said shortly, 'I did not whistle for Gaston, and the man went away before Gaston got back,' and proceeded to take her tea with the evident intention of closing the conversation.

Old Louis looked at her keenly from under his thick eyebrows, but said no more, and walked away muttering to himself, 'Strange! very strange! There is something

I do not understand here. I must interrogate Gaston.'

But Gaston proved no more satisfactory than Irene. 'What is it, then, if a stranger walks through our grounds? And whose fault is it but her own if Mademoiselle Irene chooses to sit there in the woods alone, and is startled by seeing him?' he demanded with a shrug of his shoulders.

'You surprise me by talking like that, Gaston! It is our business to protect mademoiselle from the result of her follies. She is but a child. These English girls are as innocent as babies for all their vaunted independence! I told you not to leave her, and, lo! you disobey me, and allow a stranger to annoy mademoiselle! Was he a beggar?' demanded his father.

'No, not at all! He was well dressed, and spoke English to mademoiselle. For one moment I thought it was an arranged meeting—one never knows with foreigners; but she seemed much upset when I reached her, and called him her enemy. She also said he knew madame, and that madame would not allow him to come to the house, although he had a right to do so.' Here Gaston stopped short to look in surprise at his father, who had started and seemed much disturbed at his last words.

'Did you see this—stranger?' he asked, looking anxious.

'Yes; but he left just before I reached mademoiselle. To tell the truth, I heard

voices, and came to see whom mademoiselle was speaking to, and stood and watched them for a time. I should have come forward and interfered at once if he had molested her; but they seemed to be speaking earnestly together, and he raised his hat like a gentleman when he left her,' explained Gaston.

But his father still looked troubled. 'What was he like?' he demanded.

'Tall and fair, and a foreigner,' replied Gaston. 'But what is it, *mon père*?' he asked anxiously.

Old Louis sank into a chair with a groan. 'I suspected as much! He will give us trouble yet, the wretch!' he exclaimed.

'Why, who is it? Do you know this man, then? What mystery is this? Mademoiselle binds me to silence, which I have broken in saying so much to you! And you speak in mysterious ways,' cried Gaston.

'Mademoiselle bound you to silence! Then he has told her! I warned madame that he would not keep his word. What is the word of a Prussian worth?' said old Louis, and then checked himself.

'Ah! I too had my suspicions. Then he was a Prussian! But what have we to do with Prussians? We are all loyal French patriots here, and Madame Mathers is English, surely? Ah, I understand; mademoiselle is fiancée to a Prussian! She said she liked Germans, and this man knows her fiancé,' cried Gaston.

‘You understand nothing! But perhaps I had better tell you. I am old, and may die any day, and you will then have to take my place and protect Madame de Carney and her son from possible annoyances. Listen, then,’ said his father as he told Gaston the story of Maurice de Carney’s German mother.

‘Monsieur Maurice half German! What a misfortune! How could our late master have married one of our enemies? And I have always believed him to be the son of madame. In any case, she has been a true mother to him,’ observed Gaston.

‘She has; and no one shall come now, after all these years, and rob her of her son’s love, least of all a Prussian,’ said old Louis, almost hissing out the last words.

‘Who is talking about Prussians in that unchristian way?’ demanded a young voice; and, turning round, the father and son saw, to their discomfiture, Irene’s laughing face at the door of the major-domo’s private room.

‘Mademoiselle, our conversation was private,’ said Louis in tones of mild reproach.

‘Then you should not get so violent, and hiss like a goose so as to attract attention. Moreover, I too am interested in this Prussian, who had rather a nice face,’ declared Irene, who said whatever came into her head as the whim took her.

‘Indeed! You did not seem to be favourably impressed by him or his face when I came up to you, mademoiselle,’ retorted Gaston dryly.

Old Louis shook his head at her. ‘Mademoiselle, I believe you have been told a secret. Madame does not wish it to be known. I hope you will not cause her pain by divulging it!’ he said appealingly.

‘That Prussian, who has a heart too, asked me the same thing, and I promised him not to repeat what he said, so your secret is safe as far as I am concerned,’ she said, and went off.

Old Louis looked after her. ‘She is as good as affianced to Monsieur Maurice, so it does not matter her knowing the secret. And she will keep her word; she is that sort, is Mademoiselle Irene.’

CHAPTER VII.

HOMESICK.

WHEN the rest of the party came back Irene was on the terrace to meet them, and ran down to open the door of the car without waiting for the chauffeur or Maurice to perform that office.

‘You ought to have come with us, *ma cousine*,’ began Maurice as he jumped lightly from the car, and, after helping his mother and aunt to descend, turned to Irene.

But Irene broke him off short. ‘Don’t call me that,’ she said sharply.

Her mother and aunt both looked at her a little uncomfortably; seeing which, Irene added, ‘It’s so un-English.’

‘*Tiens*, I seem to fall between two stools! Mademoiselle du Chesne was displeased with me because I am not wholly French, and you, on the other hand, find I am not English enough to please you. What am I, then?’ demanded Maurice, laughing.

There was an uncomfortable pause, and then Madame de Carney said in a harder voice than she generally spoke in, ‘You are Maurice de Carney, and by law take your father’s nationality, which is French.’

‘That certainly; but I claim also the nationality of my mother, and am proud of

my English blood and my English relatives,' said Maurice with a smiling bow to his aunt and Irene.

To her mother's surprise, Irene did not, as usual, scoff at Maurice's compliments, but unconsciously, as she imagined, came to the rescue of Madame de Carney, who did not know what to say, by exclaiming, 'You have not told me anything about your visit. Did you have a good time?'

'You do not deserve to be told anything after behaving so badly. I am glad I am not the mother of such an unruly daughter. Madame du Chesne was quite vexed at your not accepting her invitation,' replied Madame de Carney severely.

'So vexed that she has asked us to go over next Tuesday to a fête in the grounds. I am to chaperon you, English fashion, being almost a brother,' announced Maurice.

'I will not go!' cried Irene.

'Yes, Irene, you must go. It will be a very pretty sight, and a novel one for you. I have promised that Maurice will take you over in the car,' said Mrs Mathers, speaking with decision.

'You want me to go—with Maurice?' asked Irene.

'Yes, my dear. Why not?' questioned Mrs Mathers.

'I thought it was not the custom in France for young girls to go about without a proper chaperon,' objected Irene.

‘Upon my word, you are very insulting, Irene! Even in France, nowadays, one may take out one’s young cousin with whom one has been brought up,’ cried Maurice.

‘Oh, don’t!’ cried Irene; and, to every one’s surprise, she turned and walked into the house, and left the other three, who were sitting on the terrace, gazing after her in surprise.

‘Really, Irene’s temper is very uncertain, and her manners might well be improved by intercourse with Marie du Chesne. She is such a charmingly mannered girl, with none of those modern ideas,’ exclaimed Madame de Carney, who, during her long sojourn in France, had imbibed strict French notions of the way girls should behave and be brought up, and perhaps also resented her niece’s cavalier treatment of her idolised Maurice.

Mrs Mathers understood her daughter better than Madame de Carney did, and wisely did not hold the reins too tightly, with the result that Irene generally allowed herself to be guided by her mother, and told her everything. So when, at dinner that night, Irene gave short answers as to what she had been doing all day, and where she had been, Mrs Mathers did not join the other two in asking questions, but waited until she paid her evening visit to Irene in her bedroom, on which occasions Irene generally confided in her mother anything that had troubled her during the day. And that something had troubled her to-day Mrs Mathers was pretty certain.

‘Are you well, Irene? Or has some one vexed you?’ she inquired, as she sat on the side of her daughter’s bed and smoothed back the girl’s tangled curls.

‘Mother, you are like Delilah, trying to get my secrets out of me by the hair,’ laughed Irene.

‘Secrets! I did not suspect you of having any,’ replied her mother, passing over without comment Irene’s quaint version of the Scripture incident.

‘Oh, well, I meant Samson’s. Well, yes, some one did annoy me to-day; but I don’t want to talk about it. What I do want to talk about is our going back to England,’ remarked Irene.

‘Why? Are you tired of being here?’ cried her mother in surprise, and added, ‘Irene, I should like you to tell me one thing. Has Maurice said anything to annoy you?’

‘Maurice! Oh no, poor Maurice is always most polite; but I can’t explain why I would rather not go to the Du Chesnes’ with him. I am not trying to get out of it. I will go if you come too,’ said Irene.

Mrs Mathers smiled. ‘Your aunt would be shocked at your making conditions with your mother, and still more shocked at my giving way. I think the French air influences me. It is not like you to be prudish or silly, so I suppose you have some reason for not wishing to go to the Du Chesnes’ without what you are pleased to call a chaperon. I think it

absurd for a girl of fifteen to mind going to a party in a motor with a chauffeur who is an old family retainer and a boy whom she has known all her life. However, I will go with you, so you can set your mind at rest on that point.'

'Thank you, mother. I wouldn't mind in England, I dare say; but it is the French air, as you say. But you have not told me when we are going back to England,' said Irene.

'Do you really want to go back?' asked her mother. Then, as Irene nodded her head, she continued, 'I thought you were enjoying yourself here, so I did not tell you that I had a letter from Ernest'—her eldest son—'saying that he had leave from his regiment for a fortnight, and would come over here if we were not coming home next week; but I know he would rather spend his holiday at home.'

'Oh mother, how lovely! Let us go back as soon as possible,' cried Irene.

'I am afraid Aunt Isabel will be disappointed, and so will poor Maurice. We might take him back with us,' suggested Mrs Mathers.

'That will spoil Ernest's holiday. He does not care for Maurice, you know. Besides, Maurice seems silly in England. His bows and politeness are all right here, but they look so odd among English boys,' declared Irene.

Mrs Mathers said no more. It was quite true that Ernest did not care for Maurice;

but hitherto Irene, woman-like, had taken his part. As a tiny girl of five she had championed the timid boy of seven, and defended him against the teasing of her brothers, aged seven and ten; but now something had evidently upset her, and what it was she was not going to tell her mother. Mrs Mathers did not believe in forcing her daughter's confidence, so she kissed her and went away, saying that she would talk it over with Madame de Carney.

Irene tossed and turned restlessly as she thought over some fateful words she had heard old Louis say to his son: that she was 'as good as affianced' to Maurice.

'How horrid!' she muttered to herself. 'How horrid!' by which she meant not that Maurice was horrid, but that it was horrid to talk about marriage at all. Irene was young for her age, and though as a little girl she had often said what she would do when she was married, since she had entered her teens her head had been much fuller of thoughts of a great career; she wavered between an ambition to be a doctor and a desire to be a gardener. In summer the gardener had it, but in winter the doctor's seemed the ideal profession. In the meantime she was more distinguished for proficiency in sports than in studies. Marriage, so far as she herself was concerned, no more entered her head than it does the heads of most English girls of fifteen. Her one desire at this moment was to put the English

Channel between herself and the person who threatened her liberty.

Madame de Carney, as Mrs Mathers had feared, was greatly disappointed at the shortening of her sister's visit. 'But the fête? Irene is to go with Maurice, you know. You promised,' protested Madame de Carney.

'Yes, I know, and I'll keep my promise. In fact, I should like to see it myself, and think of accompanying them. Will you come too?' inquired Mrs Mathers.

'But you have seen lots of fêtes in France. It can be no novelty to you. Surely you do not share Irene's doubts about Maurice being a proper chaperon?' cried her sister.

'Oh dear, no; but I see no objection to my going; and I am not sure, Isabel, if the case were reversed, whether you would allow your French daughter to go out with my English son. However, as we can never decide what you would do under these hypothetical circumstances, we need not waste time discussing the matter. We will go to the fête on Tuesday, and return to England on Wednesday in time to welcome Ernest, who would no doubt like to run over here and see you if his time were longer. But as he has only a fortnight, naturally he would like to spend it at his home,' explained Mrs Mathers.

Irene had the task of consoling Maurice, who was 'desolated' (in his own words) at the thought of her departure.

'It is so *triste* here alone! Mamma is an

angel, of course, but she cannot play tennis with me,' he explained.

'What nonsense, Maurice! As if you cared a button whether you ever played another game of tennis in your life,' protested Irene, laughing at Maurice's tragic face.

'I care very much. It is a good game, only you make it such a business. *Du reste*, that is the fault of all you English, you attach too much importance to the sport. And I also can play card games in the evening. We are so merry together, and I shall miss that,' said Maurice.

At another time Irene would have told him not to be so egotistical, thinking only of himself, and what he would miss, instead of thinking of his mother; but she was too sorry for Maurice, who had no mother of his own, and no right to call her mother aunt or herself cousin. Moreover, though Irene did not see that it mattered whether one was half German or half French, if one had the misfortune not to be wholly English, she felt sorry for Maurice, who was proud of being 'half English,' as he supposed, while in reality he was, on his mother's side, of the blood of France's hated foes.

So to-day Irene was kinder than usual to Maurice, and did not scold him. She felt as if she had 'no right' to do so, since he was not her cousin after all. Accordingly she simply answered, 'You can play poker bridge with Aunt Isabel. You will like that much

better, because she won't get angry when you beat her, and I always do.'

'It is not serious, your anger; therefore it does not hurt. However, do not let us waste one of the few days that are left us by lamenting over the inevitable. Suppose we go for a walk in the woods. It will be cool beside the spring. I do not think I have ever taken you there, and it is one of our show-points of beauty,' replied Maurice.

'Oh no, I do not want to go there. I went there yesterday. Gaston took me,' said Irene.

'At last I discover where you went for your walk! I am not flattered that you preferred Gaston's escort to the company of myself, to say nothing of our friends,' cried Maurice.

'You need not imagine I asked to be escorted! I call it quite ridiculous that a girl cannot walk in the grounds of her hosts without a servant or some one in attendance; but old Louis insisted, and I am beginning to think it is necessary in France. England is quite different. I like France, and I think Carney is very pretty; but I am getting quite homesick for England.'

'I can quite understand that, being half English myself,' said Maurice, more out of politeness than because he felt any real sympathy for England, which he declared *triste* after his visits to the Mathers.

'Oh, I should not bother about being half English. You just be French,' observed Irene impulsively.

‘What an extraordinary remark to make! And what a poor compliment to my mother!’ protested Maurice.

‘It doesn’t matter in the least what country your mother belonged to; you take your father’s nationality with his name. Remember that always,’ persisted Irene.

Maurice looked surprised. ‘I do not understand you at all,’ he said at length.

‘Never mind understanding me. Promise me that you will always call yourself French, and consider yourself French,’ said Irene earnestly.

And Maurice, who was easily persuaded to agree with the last speaker, was so touched by her evident feeling that he promised he knew not what or why.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEMOISELLES DE CARNEY.

‘**B**EFORE you leave us you must go and say good-bye to the aunts. If it is fine, Maurice can drive you over in the car,’ said Madame de Carney at breakfast.

‘I can’t go to-day,’ began Irene.

‘We shall certainly go before we leave, Isabel,’ said Mrs Mathers quietly.

‘Ah, the good aunts! I owe them a visit too. When you are here I neglect them sometimes. It is not nice of me, for they are so kind. I wonder I have survived all the bonbons and chocolates they have stuffed me with. I shall be glad to have an opportunity of saying *bon jour* to them, so I will take you over with pleasure when it is convenient to you,’ said Maurice pleasantly.

‘I wonder that Aunt Isabel, after living all these years with Maurice and French people, has not learnt to be a little more agreeable,’ observed Irene to her mother after breakfast, when they were alone for a few minutes.

‘I wonder that you, after being with me all these years, have not learnt to be polite to your elders! It was very rude to say that you could not go to visit the Demoiselles de Carney to-day when your aunt had arranged it,’ rebuked Mrs Mathers.

‘Aunt Isabel does put one’s back up. She is so managing. What right had she to order us to go and call on the aunts? They are not my aunts, anyhow. Besides, you are older than she is; so, if any one ought to do the ordering, you should,’ argued Irene.

‘You forget that it is Aunt Isabel’s house, and that we are her guests. It is the duty of the hostess to plan entertainment for her visitors,’ said Mrs Mathers.

Irene considered this. ‘If you put it like that it sounds all right; but, all the same, Aunt Isabel *does* put one’s back up. She might have asked you if you would like to go over to-day,’ said Irene; but she made no further objections to going. Seeing old Louis in the garden gathering peaches, she went to demand one.

‘With pleasure, Mademoiselle Irene; take which you like,’ he said, showing her a basket in which about a dozen beautiful peaches lay on cotton-wool.

‘What lovely peaches! Why are they so carefully packed? Are they to be sent away?’ asked Irene as she took one.

‘Monsieur Maurice ordered them. He wishes to take some fruit and flowers to the Demoiselles de Carney, who have no garden to their villa,’ explained old Louis.

‘Why doesn’t he pick them himself, instead of letting you stand on a ladder? Let me go up and get them,’ suggested Irene, putting a foot on the ladder.

‘No, no, mademoiselle! What an idea! Besides, Monsieur Maurice does not know that I always gather the fruit off this tree. I planted it myself many, many years ago, and the gardeners are not allowed to touch the fruit. But I beg of you to come down. They require such gentle handling; the bloom is as easily rubbed off a peach, mademoiselle, as it is off a demoiselle.’

Irene laughed as she descended from the ladder. ‘Are you preaching me a sermon, Monsieur Louis?’ she asked.

‘Ah no! I would not take such a liberty. Besides, English young ladies are different,’ he replied.

‘Different! How? Do you mean we have no bloom to rub off?’ demanded Irene.

Old Louis smiled slyly as he explained, ‘I should liken young English ladies to apples rather than peaches. They have such bright colour and healthy complexion; and then they can tumble about or touch each other and remain as fresh and sound as ever.’

Irene watched the old man carefully arranging in the basket the peach he had just gathered, and deftly making a little nest with cotton-wool all round between it and the others. ‘Bravo, Monsieur Louis! That was a very clever comparison of yours. French girls are like peaches, wrapped in cotton-wool, and never allowed to mix with others properly, or to play games and be knocked about. It is a pity, for it would knock a lot

of the nonsense out of them, even if it did rub a little bloom off. Anyway, I'm glad I am an English apple and not a French peach,' she wound up with a merry laugh.

Maurice appeared soon, a large basket of flowers in his hand. 'Aunt Mabel has sent me to tell you that she wishes to start at eleven o'clock, and if you are going it is time to get ready. I hope you will come. It is a pretty drive all through the hop-fields, and it will give the aunts great pleasure,' he cried.

'Which do you think the greater inducement—the hops or the pleasure to the aunts?' demanded Irene.

'The giving my aunts pleasure,' he replied promptly.

'You're wrong; but I'll come,' said Irene perversely. She was thinking to herself how good-natured it was of Maurice to carry a basket of flowers to his aunts, a thing she was sure her brothers would never do; but she supposed his mother had told him to get them.

However, when they were packing themselves, and the flowers and fruit, and a basket of fresh salad into the car, Madame de Carney exclaimed, 'Oh, you are taking the aunts some flowers! I am glad of that! But what are in those two other baskets?'

'A little addition to the lunch. My aunts are sure to ask us to stay, and they may not have fruit or salad for three extra. Besides,

a salad fresh from the garden is always a treat to those who live in a town,' he explained.

'Dear Maurice is always so thoughtful!' exclaimed his mother, looking affectionately at him.

'I expect he had an eye to his lunch! I don't believe a French person would think he had lunched unless he had fruit and salad,' said Irene.

Maurice laughed, and started the car rather abruptly, with a farewell wave of his cap to his mother.

'What made you start like that? You nearly pitched me out,' exclaimed Irene, leaning over from the back.

They were in Maurice's little three-seater, and her mother was sitting beside him. Madame de Carney did not care to go out, and often for months never went beyond the château grounds, so she made some excuse to stay behind.

'I am not surprised at Maurice wishing to cut short your insinuations about greediness. I hope you won't say that to the aunts, Irene,' said her mother.

'Why not, if it's the truth?' said Irene.

'That is just what it is not, as you very well know; and you would spoil their pleasure in the kind thought for them which prompted Maurice to bring these beautiful flowers and fruit,' said her mother.

'I forgot the flowers. Well, perhaps it was kind of you. Good boy! Go up one,' said

Irene, patting the top of Maurice's cap; whereupon Maurice half turned to smile his acknowledgment of the civility, and promptly ran them into the bank, where by good luck the car stopped, and ran back again without doing itself or them any damage.

'Irene, you should never speak to the man at the wheel or the chauffeur,' protested her mother, who looked a little white.

Irene saw this, and was penitent in a moment. 'I am so sorry, mother. Shall I get you some water?' And she looked round for a cottage or a stream, or some means of getting what she wanted.

Maurice suppressed a smile, knowing there was no stream or water near, but said, 'It was all my fault. But wait; I have something better than water. Here is some wine which I am taking to my aunts;' and he produced a bottle from under the seat.

'No, no; I am all right. Let us go on,' said Mrs Mathers.

So Maurice started the car, and drove carefully for the rest of the way, not even opening his mouth to point out the beauties of 'our beautiful France,' which he generally did to Irene's annoyance, as she said he boasted of the beauties of nature as if he had created them!

The Demoiselles de Carney received them with exclamations of delight and welcome. 'So good of you, dear Madame Mathers, to take this long drive just to see us, and to

bring the dear Irene, growing so tall and straight like a lily !’

‘A lily with red cheeks and hair like a furze-bush, mademoiselle. I think a ragged robin would be a more suitable comparison,’ cried Irene, as she bent down to let the two old ladies kiss her on both cheeks.

‘*Mais non ! mais non !* there is nothing ragged about your hair. A very fine net, perhaps, just to keep it in bounds. But it is beautiful hair—such a lovely colour ; and your pink cheeks ; the picture of health, is she not ?’ said Mademoiselle Joséphine, the elder sister, lightly touching Irene’s cheeks as she spoke.

‘Ah, Maurice ! always thinking of the old aunts. But we have still some of the pears you sent last week.—Imagine, every week this boy sends fruit and vegetables and whatever is in season to us, and remembers our little weaknesses. I’ll be bound there is a curly lettuce for the salad. Ah, yes, here it is ! If you will excuse me, ladies, I will go and give orders to our *bonne*. We have not the staff of the château to wait upon you ; but we can manage to offer you a little lunch, if you will honour us by staying the day with us,’ said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

‘I’ll come and help you. Do let me. I learn domestic economy at school, and I will make you an English salad if you like,’ said Irene.

Mademoiselle Joséphine looked doubtful.

‘You are very kind. But an English salad! I tasted one in England when I went over there to stay once, long ago; but I have not forgotten it, and it seemed to me that it was rather unlike ours. Perhaps, my dear, we had better not try experiments, as we are old, and a salad is rather an important part of our *déjeuner*,’ she said hesitatingly.

Irene gave a merry laugh. She liked the Demoiselles de Carney, as they were called. They had such simple, courteous manners, and were always so gentle and happy. ‘You are afraid to hurt my feelings by saying that you thought the English cooking abominable; but that is what you mean. You must come to England again, and let me cook for you. You would be surprised to find how well I do it! Come back with us now,’ suggested Irene.

‘My dear, what an idea! Take an important journey like that without any preparation or thought! It would indeed be a crazy deed. It is very kind of you to wish us to come to England; but our travelling days are over,’ said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

‘Have you travelled much?’ inquired Irene.

‘A good deal in our time. We have been to Paris many times, and to the sea at Blankenbergh, and to England once,’ said the old lady, mentioning these little journeys as if they were tours round the world.

‘Is that all? Have you never been to

Switzerland, and you so near? You must go there!’ cried Irene.

‘My dear, why should we? We lead a very happy, contented life here in our little villa, and every now and again our nephew or Madame de Carney comes, or sends for us to spend a time at Château Carney, and what more can we want? To us, you will understand, no place is so dear as Château Carney. Every stone is sacred to us; and we ask no more than to live near it, and, when we die, to be buried in the burying-ground of the De Carneys in the grounds. You will have seen our names on the stone in the churchyard of our little chapel?’ asked the old lady.

‘Yes; I only noticed them the other day, and it gave me quite a turn. I thought you were dead and buried, and asked Maurice about it. He explained that as long as there was no date it meant that you were alive. I was so glad, mademoiselle!’ said Irene sincerely.

‘That is very kind of you, and you mean it; one hears that in your voice. It is a characteristic of the English—a very good trait in their character. We French say flattering things that we do not always mean; therefore one cannot always be so sure of our sincerity,’ said Mademoiselle de Carney in a musing tone. She was all the time preparing the lettuce and the other ingredients of the salad, which she eventually put into a wire basket and gave to the maid to swing.

‘A quarter of an hour at least, Marianne, to get all the water out. It should be dry, but the leaves should not be touched or crushed.—So much depends on that,’ the old lady explained to Irene.

‘I should never be a first-rate cook, because I don’t care very much what I eat,’ observed Irene.

‘But when you have guests? Surely you wish to give them of your best, and to have that best, simple though it be, nicely prepared?’ objected the old lady.

‘Oh yes; but all these little details!’ said Irene.

‘It is just the little details that make up a perfect whole. Besides, it interests me. We are not great readers. The paper—just to see that all is well with *La France*—is about all we read. So we busy ourselves about the house, and make *tisanes* for the poor, or soup, and live our quiet, simple life here, where we have all one can wish for,’ said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

‘And do you never feel dull?’ inquired Irene, who felt as if the trim, old-fashioned house, with its early Victorian furniture—only it was French style—was a dreary home.

‘Dull? *Ennuyées*? How can we? We are always busy, and have our dear nephew near, and the visits to the château; and there is much to do in the house that the *bonnes* cannot do. I have never been dull in my life, and I feel pity for the girls in this little

country town who complain of dullness, and want to go to Paris. For my part, I enjoyed my visits there when I was young; but I was always glad to come back to the château. We have not the love of excitement and change that is, alas! so prevalent now,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine, who, it will be observed, always spoke in the plural, as if she and her sister were one, which indeed they were in thought and in action.

'But the world couldn't go on if we all lived as you do,' objected Irene.

'Why not? I think it would go on a great deal better and more peaceably. We leave our neighbours alone and they leave us alone, and it saves a great deal of unpleasantness,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

'But there would be no inventions, and no new lands discovered, or—or anything!' cried Irene.

'For me—you will think me very far behind the time—but a great many of these new inventions seem to me to be the work of the Evil One himself; and there are no new lands to discover. *Le bon Dieu* has put us where we are meant to be; and when we go discovering new lands, it either means to the hot parts, where it is not fit for white men to be, and where they only fight and turn out the original inhabitants—who, if the truth be told, have most right there, or they would not have been put there—or else our foolish men, meaning to be brave, go to

find the North Pole or the South one—it is the same. It passes my comprehension why they want to do it. What good can it be to them to go where there is no place for any one to live?’ said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

‘Mademoiselle, you surprise me! I had no idea you had such advanced ideas. I shall put them all into my holiday task. You have been a great help to me this morning. I was wondering what to say, and I never heard any one express such views before!’ cried Irene.

‘I dare say they are all wrong, and I should not advise you to repeat them. Nor do I see how you can make use of them for your school work,’ observed the old lady.

‘I have to write an account of my experiences in my holidays, and this is the most interesting, except one that I can’t speak about. I shall head the paragraph, “A Day in an Ideal Life,”’ announced Irene.

Mademoiselle Joséphine laughed. ‘You absurd child! Besides, that is not quite sincere, because you do not think it ideal; though when you come to our age you may think otherwise.’

‘I am not sure that I do not think it ideal now. You seem so happy and peaceful; no quarrels, no anxieties, no troubles that I can see, and no desires for anything you can’t have,’ said Irene.

‘That is a state of mind which depends upon yourself. And now let us go to lunch,

for I feel a desire I cannot gratify, and that is to keep you with me,' said the old lady, taking Irene's arm.

Irene sighed. 'Mademoiselle, I am converted—reformed, or whatever you call it. I no longer think the English perfection. I want to be able to say naturally such pretty things as you do—all of you French,' she declared.

Mademoiselle Joséphine gave her gentle little laugh, which reminded Irene of Maurice. ' *Mon Dieu!* you flatter us. We also can be rude; and how impertinent a *bonne* can be!' exclaimed Mademoiselle Joséphine, and gave Irene a description of a scene with her *bonne*, which lasted until the old lady had arranged the lunch to her satisfaction. She then returned to the *salle*, where Mrs Mathers and Maurice were being entertained by Mademoiselle Clémentine; and again Irene thought how different an English boy was from a French one. By a day spent in a close room like this her brothers would have been bored to death, whereas Maurice seemed quite interested, and was laughing happily as he told some tale to his companions.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DU CHESNES' FÊTE.

THE day of the fête dawned bright and warm, and Madame de Carney remarked that one could depend upon the weather much more in France than one could in England.

'I don't see that,' declared Irene, who did not hesitate to give her opinion, even if it were in opposition to that of her elders. 'It has rained several times since we have been here, and very often we have a thunderstorm on a fine day like this.'

'I dare say you will have one this afternoon. It seems rather sultry, so I should advise you to take a cloak,' said her aunt.

'And yet you say you can depend upon the weather!' cried Irene in a tone of triumph.

'Yes, certainly, I can foretell a thunderstorm, and one can generally tell when there is going to be a change in the weather. But it is hopeless to make you admit the superiority of anything or any one in France. You are too hopelessly insular,' said her aunt.

'I hope you will enjoy this fête at any rate,' put in Maurice, trying to smooth matters.

'Of course I shall. I am looking forward to it,' said Irene.

‘And I hope you will be pleasant to our friends the Du Chesnes,’ said Madame de Carney, who had not forgiven Irene for staying at home the last time they had been asked to the Du Chesnes’.

‘Why on earth should I not? Do you consider me so unpleasant, then, Aunt Isabel?’ demanded Irene.

‘I think you can be so when you do not like people; and as you do not care for French people in general, or for the Du Chesnes in particular, I thought it well to give you a word of caution,’ replied her aunt.

‘I don’t dislike French people! I like lots of them, and I never said I disliked all the Du Chesnes. I don’t care for Marie; but I like the boy. He is more English than most French boys. We got on first-rate the other day. I shall be glad to see him again,’ remarked Irene.

Mrs Mathers, who was a great contrast to her sister, listened to this conversation, but did not join in it. She knew by experience that it was of no use trying to silence Irene when any one tried to correct her or argue with her. When Irene made the above remark, which Mrs Mathers knew would annoy and rather shock her aunt, as being forward, a flicker of amusement passed over her face, for she felt that her sister had been rather hard on Irene, and had brought this unmeant snub to Maurice upon herself.

Maurice got up at this juncture. ‘Come,

Irene ; the car will be round directly, so you had better get on your hat,' he said. Maurice would do anything to have things pleasant all round, and certainly had always a soft answer ready to turn away wrath. He felt that his mother and Irene were not hitting it off, and so he created a diversion.

Madame de Carney managed her son's estate with the assistance of the bailiff or agent ; and as she had an appointment with him on this particular morning, she could not go to the fête at the Du Chesnes'. Therefore Mrs Mathers went alone with the two young people.

Irene's spirits rose as the car spun along, and as Maurice was always gay, they were a very merry party.

Irene had quite forgotten the German and his visit ; and when they arrived at the Du Chesnes' she looked so bright and animated that she attracted a good deal of admiring attention. Of this admiration she was quite unaware, putting the attention down to French people staring at a foreigner. Irene's brothers criticised her long-leggedness, untidy hair, and brusque manners too severely for her to have much vanity on the subject of her looks, and she had no idea that her hair was beautiful with its unruly curls.

'The English have such wavy, shining hair. I have heard that it is the sea air,' announced Marie du Chesne, who said rather silly things sometimes.

‘Not all of us. Look at my black hair with only one curl to show that I have any English blood in me,’ said Maurice gaily as he twisted his front curl to make it ‘more English,’ as he explained.

‘You are not English,’ began Jean du Chesne; and then, seeing the looks of surprise of his young companions, he added, ‘in appearance. You are quite French, Maurice, *mon ami*.’

‘You say that as if to congratulate me; but that is not very courteous towards my cousin, Mademoiselle Mathers,’ objected Maurice, thinking Irene might be vexed.

But Irene said hastily, ‘You are quite French to look at, Maurice, and I am very glad of it. Besides, I told you the other day that a son is always of the same nationality as his father.—Isn’t he, Monsieur Jean?’ Irene, it will be observed, addressed Jean du Chesne formally, having learnt by experience that the French were shocked at her English way of addressing boys and girls of her own age or thereabouts simply by their Christian name.

‘That is so, mademoiselle. Legally and at heart Maurice is quite a good Frenchman,’ agreed Jean. ‘And now I propose taking you to see the decorations for the fête, if you care to come.’

‘Rather! I will say this for you: you French have good taste, far better taste than we English,’ observed Irene in such an un-

conscious tone of surprise that her hearers laughed heartily at her.

‘Irene cannot understand the English not being superior to all other people in everything,’ said Maurice as he walked on with Marie, the path at that moment becoming too narrow for more than two to walk abreast.

Irene and Jean fell behind ; and the former, with her usual blunt outspokenness, said to her companion, ‘Why did you say to Maurice that he was not English?’

‘In appearance, if you remember,’ corrected Jean.

‘Yes, in appearance ; but I also remember that you added that as an afterthought. I want to know why you said Maurice was not English ; and, please, don’t be untruthful, and pretend you do not know,’ remarked Irene.

‘Mademoiselle, I do not know what cause I have given you to call me untruthful,’ said Jean quietly, but colouring and looking offended.

‘You have given me none ; but if you are going to get huffy at anything I say, we had better part company at once, for I am always saying rude things without meaning it. So your path and mine must divide here,’ cried Irene, throwing out her arms and pointing to the two paths into which the woodland track divided.

Jean laughed, his good humour restored. ‘It would be far ruder of me to forsake my guest. Besides, you would soon lose your

way, and I wish to show you the preparations for the illuminations for to-night, which I think have been rather ingeniously contrived by our village carpenter,' he replied.

'Very well, let us continue in harmony—if we can; and on the way you can explain why you said'—— began Irene.

But Jean held up his hands in horror. 'But what persistency in a young lady! One sees that you will go far one of these days. When you have made up your mind what you want in this world, you will obtain it without a doubt.'

'Well, I have made up my mind to know why you said that Maurice was not English,' said Irene.

'I will tell you if you will first tell me why you imagine I meant to imply such a strange thing as that your cousin is not half English,' replied Jean at last, laying stress on the word 'cousin.'

'Because I imagine you have been told that he is not really my cousin at all,' replied Irene.

'That is so; and now I hope you are satisfied, and will change the conversation, mademoiselle,' replied Jean.

'No, because this is more interesting. Did that horrid German tell you so?' persisted Irene.

'What horrid German? I am aware that Maurice is the son of monsieur's first wife, who unfortunately was a German, and that Madame de Carney does not wish her step-

son to know this fact. Therefore it is best forgotten by us all,' said Jean.

Irene gave a great sigh. 'I wish *I* could forget it. But as you do know it, I should like to tell you about a horrid German who spoke to me in the woods that day I didn't come here. Oh, how I wish I had come!' she cried.

'I wish so too, mademoiselle; but tell me about this brute who addressed you in the woods! Who was he, and how dared he trespass in the domain of De Carney?' he asked.

'He was Maurice's uncle; he told me so on the honour of a Prussian officer,' explained Irene.

But she was not prepared for the burst of anger this aroused in Jean. 'A Prussian officer prowling about the woods of Château de Carney in the absence of its owner! That bodes no good for him; and as for a Prussian's honour, the less said about it the better. We know by bitter experience what a very queer sense of honour these folk have! What was he doing? How did he excuse his presence? He cannot have wanted to see Maurice, for he could have heard in the village or at the lodge that the De Carney car had passed through with Maurice in it,' he said wrathfully.

'He was drinking water—examining the spring and testing it, according to Gaston,' said Irene lightly, for she thought Gaston's suspicions very absurd.

But Jean did not consider it a light matter, and questioned Irene closely upon their conversation and the footmarks Gaston had noticed round the spring.

‘I wish I had never seen him. It is horrid to think that poor Maurice is no relation of mine, and is half a German, and I hate having a secret to keep. That is why I wanted to tell you,’ explained Irene.

‘I am sorry the meeting distressed you, and I quite understand your feelings; but if that was all the harm that scoundrel has done it would be well,’ said Jean very seriously.

‘Why, what harm do you suspect him of doing?’ inquired Irene.

‘I do more than suspect; I am pretty sure that honourable Prussian officer came to see whether he could not use his dead sister’s relations for his own ends. He secretly visited his nephew’s estate and examined its water-supply with the intention of giving it to the enemies of France and of Maurice,’ cried Jean in tones of suppressed anger.

‘I don’t understand what you mean,’ said Irene.

‘No, mademoiselle, I dare say not, because you have never been invaded. Nor have you the reason to hate the Germans that we have. That man was a spy, and he wanted to know how much water there was in those woods, where, no doubt, the Prussians are planning to place soldiers when they next invade us.

A very honourable man indeed!' he cried sarcastically.

'Why should he choose his nephew's grounds any more than yours? He had a very good-natured face. I don't believe he meant any harm,' said Irene.

'I only wish I could think so too; but I know them too well, and it is only too plain. Naturally he chose Château Carney for his investigations, because he had an explanation ready if found; he was the fond uncle, come to see his dear dead sister's home, which she never entered, as he very well knows,' protested Jean.

'Poor Maurice will be dreadfully upset when he finds that he is half German instead of being half English, as he fondly imagines,' said Irene with a sigh.

'I don't think so. It takes a good deal to upset Maurice! In fact, I cannot remember ever seeing Maurice upset. He takes life too easily,' said Jean with a shrug.

'And a good thing, too! I don't see any virtue in being easily upset. People of that kind are very unpleasant to live with,' declared Irene.

'Still, life is serious,' said Jean.

'You are, anyway! You are much more like an Englishman than Maurice. I never really felt as if Maurice was English, somehow; but you really are not a bit like a foreigner,' said Irene.

Jean laughed heartily. 'But, mademoiselle,

pardon me, I am not a foreigner ; not on my own grounds at all events,' he protested.

'Ugh !' said Irene, 'I forgot ; I'm the foreigner here, I suppose. Well, I shall soon be back in England and cease to be a foreigner, thank goodness !'

Jean said nothing, and again Irene felt uncomfortably conscious of having been *gauche* and rude. With her to know she was wrong was to acknowledge it, so she said, 'I beg your pardon, Monsieur Jean ; I am not thankful to be leaving France because I dislike it, or am unhappy here. On the contrary, my happiest holidays have been spent at Château Carney, and that is just why I want to go away. That German has spoilt everything. Maurice de Carney is not any relation to me really, and I can't bear to hear him call me *ma cousine*, and to think that one day he will find out that we are not his relatives ; and—altogether—I want to go away.'

'Mademoiselle, I quite understand, and thank you for your generous explanation, which was not necessary. I, too, was disturbed when my father told me of Maurice's German relatives, and do not think it wise that he should not be told, for it is a misfortune in our eyes ; and if a war came it might be awkward for him. However, I in my turn apologise. I ought not to criticise Madame de Carney, who has been a devoted mother to her step-son,' said Jean.

At this point the other two, who were in

front and had looked back continually, wondering at the earnest conversation the two behind were having, sat down on a log and waited for them to come up, which ended the discussion.

CHAPTER X.

IRENE AND YVONNE.

‘I AM glad you came back instead of sending for me to come to Château Carney. I was fearfully nervous till I got your wire to say you would be here to meet me,’ said Ernest Mathers as he greeted his mother on his arrival at Hill House, where she and Irene were waiting to receive him.

‘Your aunt and Maurice would have liked very much to see you; but I knew you did not altogether hit it off with him, so we decided to shorten our visit, especially as Irene did not seem to get on with Maurice either this time,’ replied Mrs Mathers.

‘Didn’t she? I should have thought Maurice was easy enough to get on with; he is so polite and easy-going. I simply don’t care for him—too French, I suppose. One would never suspect him of having good English fighting blood in him,’ said Ernest with a laugh.

‘Oh, do leave Maurice alone; and as for fighting blood, the French are splendid fighters,’ cried Irene, to her brother’s surprise. However, as Irene generally said what no one expected her to say, he put it down to her contrariness.

‘By all means! I have no end to tell you

of my doings since I was last at home,' said Ernest, and plunged into an account of the manœuvres in which his regiment had taken part.

Irene followed his recital with her usual eagerness and enthusiasm, and forgot all about Château Carney.

Ernest's return was the signal for an outburst of tennis-parties, picnics, and other festivities, which crowded out the memory of her unpleasant experience with Maurice's German uncle, though it was recalled to her mind very unpleasantly later on.

Ernest noticed that Irene did not care to talk about Château Carney or her visit there, and never mentioned Maurice's name. He concluded that she was 'fed up with the young beggar.' Nor did Irene ever tell him or her midshipman brother that Maurice, whom they both talked of as their cousin, had no right to that title.

Mrs Mathers, being under a promise to her sister, had not enlightened her sons, or daughter either, much though she regretted having ever made the promise; nor did she guess that Irene knew the 'secret,' as she called it.

Next week Irene returned to school, where the French girl of whom she had spoken as always arranging her hair and being vain came up to her and said, 'I hear you have been visiting my dear France.'

'Yes, I have; but how did you know?' demanded Irene, blunt as usual.

‘Ah! how indeed? A leettle bird, as you say in England,’ replied the girl, whose name was Yvonne.

‘Oh, did it? But we say “little,” not “leettle,” in English,’ replied Irene, and was passing on.

But Yvonne called her back. ‘Are you not curious to know how I heard of your presence at a fête at Monsieur du Chesne’s?’ she inquired.

‘The Du Chesnes! Do you know them?’ asked Irene.

‘Ah, now you are interested! Yes, our families are acquainted; and I heard of the handsome young English lady who was not cold and grave like so many English, as we French find, but gay and animated almost as ourselves,’ Yvonne told her.

‘The French have just as silly ideas about us English as the English have about the French. They ought to know each other better,’ announced Irene.

‘That is also what I think, and so I ask you if you will not be a friend with me, and know me better,’ said Yvonne naïvely.

Irene laughed. ‘I’ll try; but I am afraid I am too English to suit you. However,’ she added candidly, ‘I think it would be rather a good idea, because you are very polite, and perhaps I should catch the trick from you.’

Yvonne looked puzzled for a minute, and then gave a merry laugh. ‘But you are too

drôle. You wish to say polite things, like us, and you think it is catching? Perhaps you are partly right; it is a habit. But I am not sure'—she paused—'I am not sure that your habit of speaking exactly the truth is not better, even though it hurts sometimes.'

'There, you can't help being polite! We might catch each other's habits! How funny it would be if you began to say exactly what came into your head just as I do! Our Head'—head-mistress Irene meant—'would wonder what had happened to you. Fancy if, instead of expressing regret at not knowing a lesson, as you do so prettily, you were to say, "It bored me, and as it is English history it is not necessary for me to learn it, for it is mostly lies according to our French history"!'

she suggested.

'But it would be shocking! No, never could I become so rude,' protested Yvonne.

'Now, honestly, isn't that what you think when you are reading your history lesson?' said Irene.

'Not at all! Of course, we do not look at the history of the wars between our nations in the same light as you, nor is it necessary for me to commit to heart the English version of many battles between the French and the English, which is sometimes inaccurate'——

Yvonne was explaining, when Irene interrupted her with a laugh.

'Do you know, Yvonne, you have said exactly the same thing as I did, only you said

it French fashion, and I said it English fashion; and I must confess yours sounded better,' admitted Irene.

'Is it so? Then we are evidently learning from each other, and that is a good thing. We will continue so to do; and I will teach you a pretty way to do your hair, so that it will still curl naturally, and yet look tidy and keep out of your eyes,' cried Yvonne eagerly.

'Hold! enough! Never mind about my hair. It is not in the friendship. Nothing on this earth would induce me to spend an hour a day on my personal appearance. Thank goodness I am not pretty, so need not bother to be vain; and even if I were, I wouldn't spend time getting myself up. I like people to care for me for myself, not for my fine clothes,' declared Irene.

'You are not pretty; no, because you are—— But I will not pay you compliments, else you will think I care for you only for your looks, which is not true,' said Yvonne.

'I should think not. But come along, and I'll teach you to play tennis English fashion,' replied Irene.

'You will? How kind! But I fear you will find me very stupid. I know not how to strike a ball,' cried Yvonne.

'No, as I saw when I watched you playing yesterday. But you have strong wrists; and, anyhow, you can't be so stupid as my cousin—a French boy I was visiting. He had no

idea of the game, and skied all his balls,' said Irene.

'I will try to redeem the character of my nation for sport,' said Yvonne, as they went off together.

Irene noticed that Yvonne did not ask her any questions about her visit to France, nor did she mention any one but the Du Chesnes. Irene concluded, therefore, that Yvonne did not know whom she had been staying with, and was so pleased with her want of curiosity and her politeness that she felt more friendly to the French girl. That morning, indeed, was the beginning of a friendship between these two which lasted all their lives, and stood a severe test later on.

Whether Irene would have felt so friendly or whether she would have made friends at all if she had known of a certain letter which Yvonne had in her pocket at that moment is another matter. At all events, she had no idea that Madame du Chesne had written to Yvonne's mother telling her of their grand fête, and of the good impression Irene had made, and at the same time informing her of the high opinion Jean had of the English girl, and her distress when she found that Maurice de Carney was not her cousin—facts which Jean had imparted to his mother. These facts, and a good deal more, Yvonne's mother, who was a great chatterbox, had retailed to her daughter, and they were the reason of Yvonne's determination to make friends with

Irene. But it was four years before she told Irene all this, and then the scene was changed indeed.

Meanwhile the other girls of her form looked on in amazement at this new and sudden friendship.

‘It won’t last,’ said one girl decidedly.

‘Why not? Irene Mathers is not given to taking up things and dropping them again,’ said another.

‘Not things; but this is a person, and Irene doesn’t make friends—at least she never has before,’ objected the first speaker.

‘She is friendly with every one, which is a great deal better, the Head says. She doesn’t care about violent friendships, and declares they take a girl’s mind off her work. I wonder what she will say to Irene Mathers’s new departure,’ said the second.

‘She’ll say nothing, being a wise woman. She knows Irene; consequently she knows it is best to let that young woman alone when she has made up her mind about anything, unless it is wrong, and somehow one can’t think of Irene doing anything really wrong, though she is very trying,’ said another.

The girls were in the playground, where Irene was teaching Yvonne to play tennis on an asphalt court, and praising her companion’s energy and plucky attempts at the ball.

The head-mistress’s room looked on to the playground, and she and some of her mistresses were assembled having a mid-morning lunch.

The head-mistress looked after the health and well-being of her assistants, and insisted upon their having the stimulant of hot milk or beef-tea in the middle of lessons, which she knew were a strain upon them.

They, too, were watching this game of tennis, and one of the teachers observed, 'French against English—rather an unequal contest in this case. Irene Mathers is one of our best players—isn't she?—and the French girl is quite a beginner. What has made Irene choose her to play with?'

'Some whim. There is no accounting for what that girl will do, as I know by experience,' replied Irene's form-mistress, who did indeed have experiences with Irene.

The thoughtful head-mistress watched the girls for a few minutes with a smile at Irene's earnestness and the other girl's valiant efforts, and then remarked, 'I am very glad to see those two together. Yvonne is a good girl, and it will do Irene no harm to learn her pretty, graceful ways from her. She is getting too old to be so brusque and to blurt out all her thoughts in the way she does.'

'You will never cure Irene of speaking her mind. She takes a pride in saying what she chooses, and very awkward it is sometimes,' said the form-mistress, remembering the many occasions when Irene's habit of speaking her mind had caused awkward situations in class.

'I don't know. I fancy Irene is beginning to see that she is too uncontrolled in what

she says, and is trying to be more courteous this term,' said the head-mistress, who was extremely observant.

Irene's form-mistress, who was a very clever young Girton girl, with, however, little experience of girls or the way to manage them, listened to the head-mistress, admiring her power of knowing all her girls and their characters, and determined to try to emulate her, especially as she agreed, upon reflection, that Irene had once or twice since her return withdrawn or apologised for some brusque remark, and had on one occasion abstained from contradicting the mistress, although she had known her to be in the wrong.

Meanwhile the game of tennis progressed satisfactorily and gaily, and at last drew the rest of the form round as spectators, some backing Irene, but most taking the weaker side and encouraging Yvonne, who actually, to her own delight and surprise, won one game.

'Irene lost on purpose,' cried a girl.

Irene turned sharp upon her. 'Indeed I did no such dishonest thing! Yvonne won quite fairly,' she said.

'Dishonest! I don't call it dishonest to let a weak opponent win a game,' protested the girl.

'It is acting a part and deceiving your adversary, and I call that dishonest; but I know you meant it kindly,' added Irene, to the other's surprise.

‘Wonders will never cease! Irene is considering my feelings!’ said the girl in an undertone.

‘She is trying to copy Yvonne, who apologises when she sends the ball out of bounds, and causes us to “derange” ourselves to go and fetch it,’ said another.

‘Personally I don’t like rudeness, but I call all that polite bowing and scraping, so to speak, rather a nuisance,’ said the first speaker.

‘We might hit the happy mean,’ said a girl as they went in.

CHAPTER XI.

AUNT ISABEL'S ILLNESS.

IRENE'S summer holidays were spoiled by an attack of measles next year; and the year after Mrs Mathers and she stayed in England for the summer, because Ernest was expecting to be sent to India with his regiment in the autumn, and they wanted to be near him during his last few months in England.

The following summer Madame de Carney was taken ill, and her sister was telegraphed for, as she was not expected to recover.

'Oh mother, let us go at once! Poor Maurice will be so lonely if—if she dies; he has no one but his mo—— but Aunt Isabel,' cried Irene.

'I must go, but I do not know whether you had not better stay at home. The holidays do not begin until the end of the month. You will miss the last four weeks of this term and your yearly examinations. And Maurice will not be alone; he has his two aunts, his father's sisters. They are very kindly women, and very fond of him,' observed Irene's mother.

'Yes; but he is not half so fond of them as he is of you, mother, and I should like to see Maurice again. I have not seen him for nearly three years,' urged Irene, who was as argumentative and self-willed as ever,

though she was improved in manners as well as in looks.

Mrs Mathers looked doubtfully at her handsome daughter. She would rather have left her at home; but she could not give her real reason, which was that Maurice would probably fall a victim to Irene's charms, and Mrs Mathers did not want her daughter's peace of mind disturbed.

However, Ernest, who happened to be in England on special leave, brother-like had no such reticence. 'I shouldn't take Irene, mother. That ass Maurice will fall in love with her, and we don't want her to marry a foreigner. These mixed marriages are always a mistake.'

'How can you talk like that, Ernest? I never heard such nonsense in my life! I haven't left school yet, or even put my hair up, and I shouldn't think of being married for years, if ever. There are lots of things I'd rather do; but since we are on the subject—which, by the way, is no business of yours—I may as well tell you that I'd just as soon marry a foreigner as an Englishman. Anyway, I will marry whomsoever I like, when I do come to it,' answered Irene, her eyes flashing with indignation at this discussion of her by her brother.

Ernest stared at her open-eyed. 'Well, if any one saw you at this moment he'd be cured on the spot of any desire to marry you, for all your good looks. And if you want to marry a Frenchman'—— said he,

Irene stamped her foot at him. ‘Haven’t I told you I don’t want to be bothered about any such thing? And if you’ve got any nonsense about Maurice in your head you can put it out once for all, for I wouldn’t marry him if my life depended upon it. So there!’ she declared.

‘Ernest, my dear, don’t tease Irene. I do not like such subjects discussed; and, as she says, she is only a schoolgirl, and has plenty of time to think of such things,’ put in Mrs Mathers.

‘She’s eighteen, and jolly handsome; but I’m sorry I upset her, and she shall be a spinster all her life if she likes, and come out to India to keep house for me,’ said Ernest in a propitiatory tone.

‘Not I! As soon as I got there, and was enjoying myself, you’d go and get married, and your wife would hate me. I know what brothers are,’ said Irene.

‘Indeed! I am much flattered, and so is the wife I haven’t got,’ retorted Ernest.

Mrs Mathers listened with a sad smile to the two sparring. Eventually she decided to take Irene with her when she crossed to France that night. ‘She can console poor Maurice, and it will please her aunt Isabel to think she is there, even if she is too ill to see her. Irene must sacrifice two or three weeks of schooling for the sake of giving Aunt Isabel some comfort,’ said Mrs Mathers to her son.

‘All right, mother; I’m glad you are going.

I only wish I could come; but I have to be at the War Office on business all this week, and can't very well ask for longer leave. I'll see you off to-night on my way back to my diggings,' said Ernest.

Accordingly the three travelled up to town that afternoon, and Ernest saw his mother and sister off from Victoria by the boat-train, and went back to his military duties. He was a very clever young officer, and had been specially sent from India on some unusual mission which he did not explain, and about which his mother did not trouble her head, the chief thing to her being that her son had come home unexpectedly after only one year's absence.

Maurice, looking much older and very pale and grave, met them at the station in the car. 'I am so glad, so very glad, to see you, Aunt Mabel. Mamma has been asking for you and for Irene.' He turned to her with his charming smile. 'How you have grown, Irene! You are quite grown up, as you say in English. I shall not dare to tease you and pull your hair now, though you still wear it down your back,' he said.

'I am still at school and not a bit grown up. If you did pull it I should just box your ears as I used to do, only much harder, I dare say, because I am stronger; so I advise you to be civil,' said Irene, glad to make Maurice smile, he looked so grave and sad. Even after he had smiled he turned earnestly to Mrs Mathers

and began telling her what the doctor had said. 'There is still a hope, and we have sent for a specialist from Paris to have his opinion. It is some new treatment, and our doctor thinks it possible the specialist might advise it. I thought of having Sir John Smith from London to meet him, if you thought it wise?' he said in a questioning tone.

'Sir John Smith! But, Maurice, that will be enormously expensive,' demurred Mrs Mathers, who knew that Maurice was rich, but did not know whether he was aware that it would probably cost about a thousand pounds to get these two specialists and have the treatment of which he spoke.

'That does not matter, Aunt Mabel. I would give it if it cost me my estate. The only question is whether it would do good or only disturb my dear mother's last days,' said Maurice; and Irene thought she had never liked him so much.

As for Mrs Mathers, tears came into her eyes at the thoughtfulness shown to her sister by the boy who, as a matter of fact, was not her son at all. She wondered for the moment whether he ought not to be told, but dismissed the idea at once. Whether she was his mother or not, she had been one to him, and Mrs Mathers was well aware that the boy would never grudge the money when he knew, as he was to know after her death, that Madame de Carney was not his own mother.

As they drove up to the door of the château Mrs Mathers saw figures standing on the terrace, and turned to Maurice to know who they were.

‘My aunts are here. Did I not tell you? I was so preoccupied that I forgot. They have been staying here for some months now. I think mamma has felt more unwell than she would admit, for she has not done much business lately, and has left the management of the estate to the overseer and to me, and my aunts have taken over the ordering of the château,’ said Maurice.

Mrs Mathers did not make any comment on this. She guessed that her sister had known that her illness—of which she had spoken so lightly in her letters—was dangerous, and likely to be fatal, and had asked her sisters-in-law to come there that they might be ready to step into her place if she should be taken away from her son.

The two good ladies came up and tearfully embraced Mrs Mathers and Irene. ‘She knows you are coming, and is prepared to see you as soon as you have had some refreshment,’ said Mademoiselle Joséphine, taking Mrs Mathers by the arm and leading her into the château, while her sister slipped her arm into Irene’s. ‘*Ma chère* Irene, how you have grown!’ she said.

‘Not an inch, mademoiselle; at least, not an inch taller. I am a little broader and fatter, that’s all,’ replied Irene.

‘You have grown more beautiful at all events; that you cannot deny. Ah! I have made you blush. Pardon an old woman, my dear. I know you English do not like compliments,’ she said, smiling amiably at Irene.

Maurice, meanwhile, had run softly up the stairs to Madame de Carney’s room.

‘Tell her, Maurice, that I am ready to come if the nurse allows it. I do not want any refreshment,’ Mrs Mathers told him before he went away.

Irene sat down in the big, stiff, uncomfortable dining-room of the château, with its high-backed chairs, which she had always hated as a child because of their carved wooden backs, which used to hurt her, as she now remarked to the aunts.

‘In our young days we were not supposed to lean back in chairs. In fact, we children did not sit down on chairs at all at meal-time,’ replied Mademoiselle Clémentine.

‘Then what did you sit on—stools, or the floor?’ asked Irene.

‘We did not sit at all; we stood. Children were far more strictly kept in those days. We always stood in our parents’ presence. It was considered more respectful,’ said Mademoiselle Clémentine, smiling at Irene’s face of horror.

‘I’m glad I was not born then!’ Irene declared with emphasis.

‘No, my dear, it would not have suited you, I have no doubt. But we were very happy in

spite of the discipline, or perhaps because of it, and very fond of our parents.'

'You can't have been as fond of them as we are of ours. You must have been afraid of them!' protested Irene.

'We were afraid to take a liberty with them or to disobey them; but I think we were fonder of our parents than many children are of theirs nowadays,' declared Mademoiselle Joséphine.

'I should not have been! Fancy not being able to throw your arms round your mother and kiss her when you liked, or jump upon her lap!' cried Irene.

'We kissed our parents' hands after each meal. It was a pretty custom, I think. We used to file round the table after *déjeuner* and dinner. It was a way of thanking them for our food. It was better than taking all their care for granted, and it reminded us that we owed all to them,' said Mademoiselle Clémentine.

Irene opened her eyes at this. 'Mademoiselle, I am gladder and gladder that I was born only eighteen years ago! After all, I don't see why one should be so very grateful as all that. It is the duty of all parents to feed and care for their children. They brought them into the world, and if they didn't look after them they would be put in prison—and serve them right, too!—besides being worse than infidels, as the Bible says,' she announced.

— Mademoiselle Joséphine shook her head.

‘You have such original ideas, you English young ladies! For me, I prefer to be grateful to my parents, though they were stricter. Mothers go to the other extreme now, and spoil their children dreadfully.’

‘It is dangerous to give young people so much license,’ echoed Mademoiselle Clémentine, who always had the same opinions as her elder sister.

‘Who has been getting too much license?’ asked Maurice, who had come in at that minute, and had overheard this last remark of his aunt.

‘Everybody, according to Mademoiselle Clémentine; at least all young English people. But I could not have breathed in such an atmosphere of restraint as your aunts were brought up in. I am not sure that I breathe freely in France at all, even nowadays,’ laughed Irene.

‘But we did not mean to frighten you by our account of French manners fifty odd years ago; and you seem to me to breathe very comfortably. Nor do you appear to feel any restraint as regards your tongue,’ remarked Mademoiselle Joséphine slyly.

Irene laughed gently. She had been making conversation and talking upon indifferent subjects because she disliked showing her feelings; but when Maurice looked at her as if he wanted to say something, she said, ‘How is Aunt Isabel, Maurice? May I go and see her?’

Maurice's face cleared. 'If you will, and are not afraid,' he said.

'Afraid! Of what—of illness? Of course not!' cried Irene.

'Mamma is very much changed, and looks very ill,' he said.

'I am very, very sorry. Let me go and see her, if she is able to see me,' replied Irene.

'Yes, she has asked for you. Aunt Mabel is sitting beside her, and she seems better. Her coming has cheered mamma up. You have both of you done us all good already, and perhaps we may have mamma downstairs again among us before long.' His spirits were rising with their usual elasticity. It was difficult for him to be serious or sad for long. His buoyant spirit shook off trouble almost impatiently. So when Irene made some cheering reply, Maurice laughed softly.

The sound, however, penetrated to his mother's room, and she heard it and smiled. 'Dear boy, he has been so devoted since I was taken ill—and so sad! I am so glad you have come. You will cheer him up—you and Irene. Maurice was made for sunshine; he cannot live in the shadows. I have spoilt him a little, but he has been so delicate. Do you remember that day when we first saw him, Mabel, lying in the nurse's arms outside the farmhouse door? How ill he looked! I never thought that he would live and that I should rear him,' she said, smiling at Maurice,



‘How nervous Maurice is!’ said Irene impulsively.

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who had come in with Irene, to whom she held out her hand.

Mrs Mathers looked first at her sister and then at Maurice, wondering at Madame de Carney's speaking in this way, and looking to see what effect it had on Maurice; but he only said, 'She is wandering a little,' and explained to Irene, 'She is speaking of the time when I was first put into her arms a puling infant whom she never expected to rear.'

Irene never gave any sign that she knew to what Madame de Carney was alluding, but bent over her aunt and kissed her as she asked if she felt a little better.

Madame de Carney shook her head. 'I shall never be better; but I want to ask you a favour, Irene. Will you promise to do something for me after I am gone?' she said, looking pleadingly at Irene.

Mrs Mathers made a slight movement as if to object. Her younger sister had always been self-willed and rather unreasonable, and the elder sister feared she was about to ask Irene to make some promise which might be as troublesome to keep as the one she herself had made regarding Maurice's birth. She was going to refuse to let Irene make any such promise, reluctant though she was to thwart the sick woman.

But before she could interpose Irene said gently, 'I will, if I can, Aunt Isabel. What is it?'

‘I want you to promise to be kind to Maurice,’ she began in a weak voice.

Mrs Mathers, who knew that her sister’s dearest wish was that Maurice should marry Irene, sat in dread of what was coming next.

But she need not have feared. Irene seemed to know what was meant, and smiled back at her aunt. Without letting her finish what she was going to say, she held out her hand to Maurice and said firmly, ‘I promise always to be kind to Maurice, and be his friend all my life.’

Madame de Carney gave a little sigh of satisfaction as she looked at Irene’s strong hand, which was clasping Maurice’s like an elder sister’s, though she was two years younger. ‘Thank you, Irene; I know I can trust you. Maurice is not strong; but you are. I think I will sleep a little now. I am tired,’ she said as she turned on her side and shut her eyes.

Mrs Mathers made a sign to the two young people to go away, and they stole off on tiptoe to rejoin the aunts in their sad vigil downstairs.

‘She is sleeping quite peacefully, my aunts. I really believe she is going to get better. The specialist will be sure to think her strong enough for his treatment,’ said Maurice brightly to the two old ladies.

CHAPTER XII.

MAURICE LEARNS THE SECRET.

MRS MATHERS came down for dinner, and soon after the doctor and the great French specialist arrived and went up to the sickroom, where they stayed some time.

Maurice almost drove Mrs Mathers and Irene distracted by his nervous pacing up and down the room and the questions he kept putting to them as to what they thought the doctors could be doing and talking about all this time, and what their verdict would be. 'At all events I have suggested to the doctor that he should send for the English specialist for another consultation,' he was saying, when old Louis came into the room and asked that Madame Mathers and Monsieur Maurice should come into the *salle* and speak to the doctors.

Maurice's lip trembled. 'You will come with me, Aunt Mabel?' he said, and he followed her out of the room almost as if he were afraid to see the doctors.

'How nervous Maurice is!' said Irene impulsively.

'Yes, my dear, he is a delicate boy. I wish he were strong like you,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

'He is up and down like a shuttlecock,' said Irene.

But when Maurice came back his mood was changed, and Irene saw him more excited than she had ever known him to be before. 'He knows nothing, that specialist! You heard, Aunt Mabel, how he hesitated and would not say outright what he really thought. We will not pay any attention to him. Louis shall send a cable to Sir John Smith. English people are more straightforward,' he exclaimed.

'But, Maurice!' protested his aunts in unison.

'I beg your pardon, my aunts; you must forgive me. I am not myself, and, after all, I am half English. It is only natural I should have an English doctor for my English mother,' he said, courteous as ever.

'True, our sister-in-law is English, and an English doctor might understand her better,' suggested Mademoiselle Joséphine without asking any questions.

But Irene turned to her mother. 'What does the specialist say?' she asked in a low tone.

Low as she spoke, Maurice heard her. 'He does not advise our doing anything! As if we had fetched him all the way from Paris to tell us that! I will tell Louis to send that cable at once; there is no time to lose,' Maurice said, and disappeared to consult old Louis.

'I did not expect anything else, nor did Isabel,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine to Mrs Mathers.

'Do you not think Maurice ought to be

stopped from going to this useless expense?' suggested Mrs Mathers.

'Let him do it. It consoles him, and it will console him later on to think that he did everything he could to save his mother's life,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

'That is just it. When he is told the truth I know he would never grudge it. It is difficult to explain what I mean, but she has not the claim upon him that he thinks,' said Mrs Mathers, glancing at Irene, who, however, seemed to be taking no interest in what was being said.

'When he knows the truth—that he owes his life to her—he will be thankful that he did all he could to save hers,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine firmly.

Mrs Mathers said no more. At heart she quite agreed with Mademoiselle de Carney, but she wished that Maurice had never been misled as to his relationship to her.

He came back presently in good spirits again. 'Louis is going to send a cable to Sir John, which will bring him at once if he likes an interesting case, and wishes to win fresh laurels by curing a patient given up by our great Parisian,' he cried.

Irene looked at him pityingly. She saw that her mother had little hope, and somehow, though she knew nothing of illness or death, she did not feel as if her aunt would ever get better, although even the doctor said she was stronger that evening.

‘Maurice, you must go to bed to-night. The English specialist cannot come till to-morrow, and you have not been to bed for two nights,’ protested Mademoiselle de Carney.

‘No, no; if she wakes she will like to see me; and if she sleeps, I too shall sleep on the couch in the anteroom, where the nurse can easily rouse me. But you, Aunt Mabel—you must be tired after your journey and the crossing. If you will go to bed I will call you if my mother wakes,’ Maurice said.

‘I do not think anything of a few hours’ journey, and I am not at all tired. I will not leave my sister to-night,’ said Mrs Mathers.

‘Ah, you are such great travellers, you English! We could put the big arm-chair in the sickroom—the one dear Isabel brought from England. You could doze in that, and we will go to bed. We have not rested much these last nights,’ said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

Irene too was sent to bed, and slept soundly until she heard footsteps, and, getting up, saw lights in the passage. Evidently the whole house was aroused. Fearing that her aunt was worse, she threw on a dressing-gown and made for the sickroom, where she heard passionate weeping. It was Maurice, and without being told she guessed the truth, and hesitated at the door.

Her mother came to her. Maurice’s two aunts were trying to comfort him, and she could be spared. ‘Aunt Isabel passed away in her sleep, my dear. It was best so. No

one could have done anything to save her,' she said.

Poor Irene felt quite irritated with herself that she could not be openly sympathetic like the two aunts, who petted and embraced Maurice at intervals, and she felt still more irritated with Maurice for liking that sort of thing and being so demonstrative in his grief.

'Mother, I feel a perfect brute; but I can't keep talking about it,' Irene cried, as she and her mother were walking along a garden path on the day after the funeral.

'French people are different. I think it relieves one to give way, only our insular reserve prevents our doing so. I am rather dreading the lawyer's visit, Irene, and I think I had better tell you why,' her mother replied.

'I know; at least I think I do,' said Irene hastily.

Her mother looked surprised, and observed, 'I do not think you can know this, for it is a family matter which neither you nor Maurice nor the world in general has ever been told about; nor is the world to be told now. I think both you and Maurice ought to have been told long ago; but your aunt did not wish it, and I did not like to oppose her.'

'I wish you had told me,' said Irene, and proceeded to tell her mother how and when she had learned the truth.

Mrs Mathers exclaimed in vexation, 'I never thought you would have kept anything like that from me, Irene! I think I ought

to have known. I do not like this story of Hermann Stoltz prowling about Maurice's woods. I am afraid he will give trouble now that he knows Maurice is alone in the world,' said she, looking worried.

At this moment they saw the two sisters coming towards them, evidently rather agitated.

'Madame, the lawyer has come to make arrangements about the estate, and he tells us he is to impart to dear Maurice some news which we feel will pain him. I cannot speak more openly, but will you not come and join your entreaties to ours to stop him?' cried Mademoiselle Joséphine.

'Irene knows all about it, mademoiselle,' said Mrs Mathers, explaining the circumstances, 'and I think it is high time that Maurice was told. This man may come and tell Maurice himself, and the shock would be greater coming like that. It has been a mistake all along,' she added firmly.

Many were the exclamations of the sisters.

'The fiend! He was spying, without doubt. Ah! you smile, Mademoiselle Irene; but you do not know them. They come and make maps of our country, and mark our wells and springs for the time when they will again invade us! I have experienced it once, and have not forgotten the horrors of that time, with the ferocious Prussians overrunning our village and our château,' cried the elder sister, her eyes flashing in a way that Irene would

never have imagined possible for the gentle old Frenchwoman, who was trembling with rage.

‘I did not know you were old enough to remember the last war, mademoiselle. You don’t look more than forty,’ said Irene, smiling at her and taking her arm, for she knew that it was a weakness of the old ladies to be considered young, though they spoke of themselves as old.

‘I was a girl of sixteen, and Clémentine was fifteen, and scenes such as we saw then do not easily fade from one’s memory. However, I see with you that poor Maurice must be told now, though it will be like losing more relatives,’ said Mademoiselle Joséphine with a sigh, which her sister echoed.

‘We will not let it make any difference, mademoiselle. Indeed, I was just going to suggest to you that we should take Maurice back with us to England. He will be coming of age in a couple of months, and I think he will feel it less if he spends the day with us, instead of passing it here, where there were to have been such great celebrations,’ suggested Mrs Mathers.

‘It is an excellent idea! And so good and kind of you, dear madame, especially as he is no relation,’ cried the sisters.

‘He is my dear sister’s beloved step-son,’ corrected Mrs Mathers.

‘True, and almost your adopted nephew; and he will be glad to go to you and get away

from this château, so *triste* for him now that Isabel is not here; and we can make necessary alterations and install ourselves permanently while he is away,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine briskly.

When they were gone Irene turned to her mother. 'After all, mother, I'm rather glad we are not like the French. They can't feel much, for they get over things in no time; and Mademoiselle Joséphine looked quite pleased just now at the thought of having the château to themselves,' she said with some scorn.

'You must not forget that it was their childhood's home. I remember how tearful they were when they left it to make way for Aunt Isabel. Nor shall I ever forget the graceful and affectionate way they welcomed her, and helped her to install herself in their stead. They had refused to meet Uncle Emile's German wife; and, though they would have preferred a French bride, they were only too thankful that Isabel was not of the hated German race,' explained her mother.

'I suppose you don't want me to come in to the family gathering, do you, mother? I'm so afraid Maurice will make a scene when he hears that he is not English, and I do hate a scene!' said Irene.

'No, there is no necessity for you to be there; in fact, I think it will be better if you are not. But if I send Maurice out to

you, you must have patience with him,' said Mrs Mathers.

'Oh yes, I will be as nice as I can to him; but I wish he were like Jean du Chesne. He is much more manly,' said Irene, who had renewed her acquaintance with that young gentleman.

'People cannot alter their characters. Moreover, Maurice has been delicate all his life, and perhaps rather spoiled by his—mother. I shall always consider her as such,' replied Mrs Mathers, and then she went in.

She had not been gone a quarter of an hour when Irene saw Maurice hurrying towards her.

'Irene,' he said, holding out his hand, 'I have heard! They have told me that you are no relation to me!' he cried.

Poor Maurice had evidently been crying bitterly, for his eyes were red and swollen, and Irene felt angry with herself for letting this annoy her. However, she gulped down her annoyance, and, taking his hand, said, 'It will never make any difference, Maurice. I have known it for three years, and I feel just the same as I did before I knew. Just at first it was a shock to me—as I suppose it is to you—when that German told me he was your uncle.' Irene stopped short at sight of Maurice's face.

'What!' he exclaimed. 'What is this you tell me? A German claiming relationship to me! Impossible! I have no German blood

in me !' cried Maurice indignantly, throwing back his head proudly.

'Oh Maurice, I am so sorry ! I thought they had told you,' cried Irene, vexed at having let out more than she ought.

'But I am glad to know. I ought never to have been deceived ! Ah, what am I saying ? My mother—my dear step-mother—did it for the best. No doubt she was right. But I would like to know what further misfortunes await me. Perhaps I am not Maurice de Carney at all. I had better ascertain,' he cried, and was going back to see the lawyer, when Irene stopped him.

'Yes, you are, Maurice, and it is not such a misfortune after all. Your uncle is a gentleman and a Prussian officer,' Irene said to console him.

'A Prussian officer ! What horror ! You know not what that means to a Frenchman. I will never acknowledge him—never ; not one of them shall ever set foot upon my land,' cried Maurice.

'But he has,' replied Irene ; and for the third time that morning the story of Colonel Hermann Stoltz's visit to the spring in the Château Carney woods was told.

If the aunts had been indignant, Maurice was far more so ; so furious, in fact, that Irene, out of contrariness, was driven to take his uncle's part. 'After all, Maurice, he is your uncle, and he has a right to visit you, and there was no very great harm in his walking through

the grounds to see what kind of a place his sister's son lives in,' she argued.

'No harm, indeed!' I have my doubts. It looks suspicious; and, at any rate, it was a great want of delicacy to do so without an invitation. But, then, Germans have no delicacy; they are a gross people. Remember, Irene, I repudiate them, and no one shall ever know that I have any of that blood in my veins. I have imbibed English ideas from my mother and French patriotism from my father, and the accident of my birth shall be forgotten by me and remain unknown to every one,' said Maurice, who seemed suddenly to have become a man, and spoke with determination.

'All right, I will never speak of it; you may be sure of that,' Irene assured him.

'And you will remain my cousin?' he persisted.

'Yes, I adopt you as a cousin, and will be your friend all my life, as I promised to your mother,' she agreed.

Maurice gave a sigh of relief. 'I am consoled. I felt, when the lawyer read out that statement about my being mamma's step-son, that I was a kind of foundling; I felt so lonely. But Aunt Mabel at once said I was her dear nephew, and that I was to come home with her; and then I thought of you, and wished to know if you were changed. But that is all right too.'

CHAPTER XIII.

WAR'S WORRIES.

RATHER more than a year afterwards, Irene Mathers, now a very good-looking girl of nineteen, was reading a letter as she sat at the window of the morning-room at Hill House. She was in mourning, and looked graver than of old, but she smiled as she read the letter.

‘It is from Maurice de Carney. He is *fiancé*,’ she announced to a middle-aged lady who was sitting not far from her, knitting a white shawl.

‘Maurice de Carney! He is that French connection of yours? I am glad to hear it. I was afraid you might marry him,’ said the lady.

Irene laughed heartily. ‘You need not have been. He used to admire me when he was a boy, but he decided that I was too independent, I think. Anyway, he is going to marry a French girl who lives near him—a most suitable marriage, he calls it. She is a Mademoiselle du Chesne. I didn’t care for her much, but she has a very nice brother,’ she announced, outspoken as ever.

‘Will you go to the wedding?’ inquired her companion, who was a cousin of her father’s.

‘Oh no, I could not. Maurice would not

expect it so soon,' said Irene hastily, as her eyes filled with tears. For the mourning she wore was for her mother, who had died rather suddenly a couple of months before.

'When is he to be married?' hastily asked Miss Mathers, who could not bear to see any one unhappy.

'In August. They are to have great celebrations, as Maurice did not have any on his twenty-first birthday. But he says one thing which pleases me. The aunts are still to live there. Marie says the château is quite big enough for them all, and she does not wish them to be turned out.'

'That is very nice of her. She must be an unselfish girl,' remarked Miss Mathers.

'She didn't strike me so. Ah! this accounts for it.' Irene read on, "especially as they can take care of the château while we are at our apartment in Paris." Miss Marie does not mean to bury herself at Château Carney,' she laughed.

It was towards the end of July 1914, and Miss Mathers, after a moment's silence, observed, 'I hope this threatened trouble between France and Germany will blow over. It would be dreadful if war broke out and stopped the wedding.'

'There is always trouble threatening somewhere, and critical situations. I believe the papers get up a crisis whenever their circulation is going down, because they have no news,' said Irene lightly.

Hill House was in the country, about two miles from a station, and neither of the two troubled much about politics or public news or the papers. Since her mother's death Irene had lived there very quietly with this cousin of her father's.

Ernest, as Irene had prophesied, had become engaged after he had been out in India about a year, and only his mother's death had prevented his being married this year.

Tom Mathers, the young lieutenant in the navy, was expected home that week, and both brothers insisted upon Irene remaining in the old home and keeping everything as it was under the care of Miss Mathers.

'It seems more serious than usual, judging by to-day's paper; but, as you say, we have had these scares before, and the trouble has been averted,' said Miss Mathers, continuing placidly to knit.

'Still, I may as well go to my Red Cross lecture. I don't suppose any of us would be of any earthly good if there were a war. Besides, there couldn't be a war in England, if we ever did get dragged into one. But it's a good thing to know how to bandage a broken limb, seeing that our doctor is two miles away,' observed Irene, folding up the letter and going out of the room with a good-bye nod to her cousin.

Miss Mathers went on knitting. Irene wondered whether she ever would come to

an end of the numerous shawls and jackets and other dainty garments that she seemed to spend her life in making for her numerous friends and friends' babies. However, she was very kind and very amiable, and got on well with Irene, which, as her brothers said, was a great thing, that young woman having a will of her own, and not being very easy to manage, although she was very much improved, and had toned down greatly.

Miss Mathers knitted on for another hour, and then went to make a round of the gardens. She was not very intellectual, but she was an excellent housekeeper and manager, and so tactful with it that she managed to make all do their work well without any scolding or friction. If Irene had but known it, her cousin managed her very often even when she appeared to be giving in to her young relative.

Miss Mathers had just succeeded in persuading the gardener that some ground he declared was wanted for potatoes would do much better for asparagus kale, a vegetable of which Miss Mathers was very fond, when she saw Irene coming up to her with hurried steps and looking very excited, as she waved a paper which she held in her hand.

'You were right, Cousin Annie; there is to be war,' she cried, even before she came up to her cousin.

'War! How do you know? And with whom?'

‘Between Austria and Germany and Russia, and the French have joined in,’ explained Irene in breathless tones.

‘Oh, I thought you meant with us and some country,’ replied Miss Mathers with evident relief.

‘But France! It will affect Maurice, and his château is not far from the frontier. The Germans overran it last time there was a war,’ cried Irene.

‘That was forty years ago, and this time France has Russia to help her. The Germans will not win so easily,’ Miss Mathers reassured her.

‘At any rate, it will put off Maurice’s marriage,’ said Irene.

‘But why? He is not in the army, and all social life cannot stop even if there is a war,’ argued Miss Mathers.

‘They say at the Red Cross meeting that we may be drawn into war too,’ added Irene, walking back towards the house with her cousin.

Miss Mathers stopped short for a moment at the thought of such a calamity, and then, dismissing the idea from her mind as improbable, remarked quietly, ‘Some people find a pleasure in prophesying dreadful things. Come and have tea, dear. You look hot and tired.’

‘I feel hot. Every one was so excited. They said a European war was bound to come; it has come, they believe,’ replied Irene.

Miss Mathers said nothing, but led the way to the lawn, where, under a chestnut-tree, the tea-table was set and the silver kettle on its stand was steaming furiously.

Certainly it was difficult to have a picture of war in one's mind when the scene was so peaceful, and Irene managed to enjoy her tea in spite of the rumours she had heard. She sat down afterwards and wrote to Maurice congratulating him, and asking him at the same time what she was to send from herself and 'mother, who would like me to send you some remembrance of her. I suppose your marriage will be a quiet one, now that this dreadful war has been declared; so, if you like, my cousin, I will come over for it,' she wound up.

The letter was despatched, but it was not for a week that Irene, fully occupied with Red Cross classes, found time to wonder why she had no answer to it. During that week so much had happened! Some days after Britain had declared war Irene observed to her cousin, 'Maurice de Carney has never answered my letter. I wonder what he is doing.'

'It is not surprising if he has been as much occupied as you have been. And even if he has written, very likely the letter has been delayed. Everything seems to be disorganised with banks behaving like this,' said Miss Mathers with some asperity. One declaration of war had followed another, but nothing had

ruffled her so much as the bank being closed for four days.

‘People say shutting the banks was a very good move,’ declared Irene, whom it had not affected.

‘People say! People say a good deal of nonsense. It is not a good move to leave people with a few shillings in their purse and several pounds to pay in wages, to say nothing of the necessities of life, which one might have had to go without,’ cried Miss Mathers.

‘But you didn’t have to go without, Cousin Annie. I’m sure the tradespeople were most obliging, and begged you not to trouble about your weekly account,’ said Irene.

‘That did not prevent me from troubling. It has been a dreadful time. When Biggs the grocer told me he would accept my cheques and serve me as long as the goods in his shop held out, I felt as if everything was swimming round me. It was like being on a desert island, with starvation rations being doled out,’ said Miss Mathers.

Irene tried to look sympathetic, but failed, and gave way to hearty laughter, in which Miss Mathers did not join. ‘I am sorry, Cousin Annie, but it really is comic the way every one has been going about talking as if he or she were ruined, and going to be starved; and nothing has really happened except that you have been laying in enough provisions for a year’s siege, which we have been told

in the newspapers and from the pulpit is very selfish and unpatriotic,' said Irene.

She had unfortunately touched upon another grievance, for Miss Mathers replied, 'The newspapers can say what they like, and, of course, one takes no notice of them; but I deny the right of the clergy to interfere with the provisioning of one's larder! I have this household to feed, and I consider it my duty to provide against any possible shortage of eatables, and I will continue to do so in spite of the vicar.' She looked like a dove with its feathers all ruffled.

Irene only laughed. She knew nothing of the cares of housekeeping, and the vicar's sermon upon the selfishness and want of thought which allowed any head of a household to try to provide liberally for his house at the risk of causing a scarcity in other households had seemed to her quite just.

Presently Irene returned to her own anxiety. 'I shall wire to Maurice to ask if he and the aunts are all right. The Germans seem to have been dropping bombs on the town close by, and they may have burnt the château. Anyway, I should like to know how they all are, and what is settled about the wedding, because if we are to go we had better make some preparations,' she said.

'Go where? To France? What can you be thinking of, Irene? It is the very last place I should choose to go to just now,' said Cousin Annie with surprise.

‘I should not choose to go there either at this moment, but when the war broke out I promised that we would go if it was to be a quiet wedding. If you don’t care to come, or are afraid, I can easily take Martha,’ said Irene. Martha had been her nurse, and was now her maid.

‘I most certainly am afraid to cross the Channel, with submarines and mines everywhere! It would be little short of suicidal,’ declared Miss Mathers, in whom the war seemed to have developed another side.

‘They can’t be everywhere, or our boats could not cross the Channel every day as they do,’ argued Irene.

‘They are obliged to go on business, which is quite another matter,’ replied Miss Mathers, though she did not explain how people who were obliged to go were safer than she would be, logic not being her strong point.

‘Well, perhaps I shall not be obliged to go; but I wish I could hear from Château Carney,’ said Irene.

Some days after, as no letter came, she sent off a telegram asking for news, and spent the rest of the day in looking out of the window for the telegraph-boy.

At last Miss Mathers lost patience with Irene’s restlessness. The unheard-of inconveniences of the last fortnight had made her slightly irritable. ‘Really, Irene, I wish you would not jump up and down every minute like that,’ she expostulated.

‘I am sorry. I thought that might be the telegraph-boy,’ explained Irene, sitting down on the window-sill this time, so that she could command the drive without moving, and see any one who turned off half-way up to the back entrance.

‘The telegraph-boy does not come in a light cart. That was probably the grocer, and I hope he has brought my order, and not half, as he did last time,’ said Miss Mathers with asperity.

She had scarcely said these words when the parlourmaid came in and said, ‘Please, ma’am, Mr Biggs says he’s sorry, but he can’t let you have more than one ham this week.’

Irene gave a quick glance of surprise at her cousin, and then turned to the window to hide a smile.

‘Very well, I shall get one elsewhere, you may tell him,’ said Miss Mathers, placidly continuing her knitting.

‘If you please, ma’am, Mr Biggs he says to tell you, with his compliments, that he would be glad to oblige you, but he can’t send more than one ham to a small family at one time under the present circumstances, not knowing when he’ll get any more; and I was to tell you it’s not a bit of good you going to any other grocer in the town, as they won’t let you have it neither,’ said the girl, not rudely at all, but evidently flurried and scared by this state of things.

Miss Mathers knitted more rapidly, dropped

a stitch, and said 'Tut!' whether to the shawl or to the maid cannot be said; but the latter took it for an answer, and departed.

'I will deal at the Stores in London. It is really more satisfactory than these small country shops,' said Miss Mathers.

'I hope you won't leave Biggs, Cousin Annie. We have dealt there ever since I can remember,' protested Irene.

'While Biggs continues to serve us properly I will go there. What he cannot supply us with I will get from London,' said Miss Mathers obstinately.

'That depends. The Bellairs ordered some goods just before the war, and they haven't arrived yet. People say the railways are all wanted for the mobilisation of troops, and all other traffic has to wait,' said Irene.

'Tut!' was all Miss Mathers said, but the nervous clicking of her needles showed that she was displeased.

Irene found herself wondering how it was that her cousin, who had no near relatives in the army or navy, and therefore no personal anxieties about their safety, should be so upset over what she, Irene, considered trifles. She did not realise that it was just this freedom from serious care that caused her cousin to dwell upon those trifles which made up the interest of her narrow life.

Irene's sailor brother had written to say all leave was stopped, and was off no one knew where; his sister must not expect to see him

till the war was over, which he apparently expected to be 'shortly.' Her brother Ernest was in India, and might be sent to the front—very probably would.

Meanwhile Irene could not settle down to anything till she had received an answer to her telegram, a feeling that something was wrong at Château Carney having taken possession of her. Finally she put on her hat and went down to interview Mr Biggs, who, besides being a grocer, was postmaster of the neighbouring town. Being a friend of hers, he would, she knew, do anything he could to help her.

Miss Mathers was running a pale-blue ribbon through the corner of her white shawl, which was to make the angle cut off into a little hood, and was too much interested in her work to go with Irene, even if she had sympathised with her errand, which she did not.

CHAPTER XIV.

IRENE TO THE RESCUE.

IT was with a sense of relief that Irene closed the door of the house behind her. She liked Cousin Annie to a certain extent, and she was most grateful to her for shutting up her own house to come and take care of her and Hill House. But though they got on very well together, they had very little in common, and Irene breathed more freely when she got away from the cramped atmosphere which surrounded good Miss Mathers.

‘Yes, Miss Irene, I sent off your telegram within a quarter of an hour, and that’s all I can say about it, except that it has not been returned as “undeliverable.” Therefore, I take it, it has been delivered,’ said the postmaster, who was looking harassed.

‘Of course it would not be returned as undeliverable. Why on earth should it?’ demanded Irene.

‘Ah, why indeed? Because everything is topsy-turvy nowadays, and you can’t be sure of anything,’ he retorted, throwing out his hands with a gesture of despair.

‘You are as bad as Miss Mathers. She is so upset because she can only have one ham at a time that she finds life a burden,’ laughed Irene.

‘One ham! It’s well to be able to get a ham at all! But when you send cheques for goods, and they are returned to you because there are no goods for you, you look round your shop and wonder whether you had better put up your shutters, let alone giving folk two hams to put by! And as if that wasn’t enough, you have the authorities ordering you here and ordering you there, and keeping you out of your bed all night as if you were sixteen, and didn’t mind such things, instead of being sixty and wanting your rest and regular hours,’ he complained.

Irene listened in bewildered astonishment to this tirade. ‘But what on earth do the postal authorities—if it is they whom you mean—want you to sit up all night for?’ she asked.

‘As for what authorities they are, I don’t know; but orders have come down that some one has to be on duty at the instrument day and night; and as the young woman can’t be expected to do night-work, there’s no one else but me,’ he explained.

‘I should not take any notice of them, if you do not know who they are,’ replied Irene with decision.

The old man shook his head. ‘It’s easy for you to talk, Miss Irene; but these are times when you’ve got to obey orders; and as for who they are that gives them, I can pretty well guess it’s the military, though they come from our head branch office. Anyway, if I wanted to sleep I doubt if I could, with the

trains passing all night long as they've been doing,' he said.

'I can hear them on the hill. I suppose it's troops passing through. I felt I wanted to get up and go to the station and wave to them, bless them all!' cried Irene.

'Don't you think of doing such a thing, miss; not to say you wouldn't be allowed. And pray don't mention anything I've said, or I'll get into trouble. I let my tongue run on with you; but there, I know it's safe,' he remarked.

'You haven't said anything except that the trains were always passing through at night and kept you awake, which I knew before, not being deaf. We heard them quite plainly at Hill House, although we are two miles from the station. It doesn't want much intelligence to guess that they are troop trains,' said Irene.

'No, miss, very likely not; but I think least said soonest mended, though I don't go so far as the stationmaster, who snaps you up if you make a remark about anything, as if we were all spies and traitors; and me born and bred here, and my fathers for generations unnumbered. You would think he was burdened with all the State secrets of the nation to guard instead of his little station,' said the postmaster with scorn.

'Do you know, Mr Biggs, I think I shall send a wire to some people at Ixe; it's not very far from Carney, and they know the De Carneys, and could tell me about them,' said Irene, tearing off a telegraph-form.

‘What place did you say, miss?’ asked the postmaster.

‘Ixe. It is a town on the borders of Belgium and France—such a pretty place. We often used to go there, and I know the mayor slightly. He keeps an hotel where we used to lunch,’ she replied, writing while she spoke.

‘Just wait one moment, Miss Irene,’ said the postmaster, going to his instrument, from which he sent off a telegram. After waiting a little he had an answer back, which he read, and then came to Irene. ‘I’m sorry, miss. I was afraid of that. The telegram is “not deliverable,”’ he announced.

‘What telegram? I haven’t sent it yet,’ she exclaimed.

‘No, miss, I want to save you the trouble. That telegram can’t be delivered in Ixe,’ he repeated.

‘And why not, pray? Has the cable broken between France and England?’ asked Irene.

‘No, miss; but the Germans are in Ixe,’ he said.

The telegraph-form dropped from Irene’s fingers and fluttered to the ground. ‘The Germans in Ixe! Impossible!’ she murmured.

‘Wouldn’t surprise me if I saw them walking into this shop! They have impudence enough for anything,’ declared the postmaster.

But Irene was not listening to him. ‘Then I dare say they are at Carney, and that is why

I have not heard. Oh, poor Maurice ! and the old aunts ! Oh that horrid German ! I wish I had poisoned him, or something,' she cried more to herself than to the postmaster, who listened with sympathy, though he did not understand what she meant.

' Ah ! there's a good many of us feel a bit murderous at times towards them villains,' he agreed with feeling.

With an absent-minded good-bye, Irene turned and left the shop ; and perhaps at that moment she felt more lonely and missed her mother more than she had yet done. Cousin Annie did not seem to have a mind beyond soft white shawls, which she certainly knitted very quickly and cleverly, but which Irene did not consider necessities at any time, far less now. So she went home without any intention of confiding in her cousin, and was not disappointed, though she was surprised, to hear that Miss Mathers had ordered the carriage and gone to the little town.

When Miss Mathers came in she was carrying a large brown-paper parcel, which was astonishing in itself, as she never carried her own parcels, and she looked quite animated. ' Irene dear, are you very busy just now, or could you wind some wool for me ? ' she inquired as she put her parcel on her work-table and sat down beside it herself.

' No, I am not doing anything,' said Irene, without much interest. But to her surprise, instead of the parcel being full of white wool,

it contained khaki-coloured wool. 'Why, Cousin Annie, what is this?' she asked.

'My dear, it's socks for our men. Thomas and James have been called up—they were in the Reserve; and William has just told me he is off to enlist. The marches try their feet so, and I am going to knit them all socks. Every one says socks I knit are so soft to the feet, and I shall powder them with boracic powder,' Miss Mathers announced.

'I wish I could knit, but I can't. One row always gets big and the next small, and I make a hopeless muddle of it,' said Irene, as she set about her winding.

'Unless you do it properly it is best to leave it alone. Nothing is so uncomfortable as a badly knitted pair of socks. Some people knit so tightly that it is quite hard to the feet,' said Miss Mathers, with evident satisfaction in her superior talent in the knitting line.

Irene thought to herself that her cousin's interest in knitting for them outweighed her regret about the departure of the under-gardener, the head-gardener's son, and the carpenter, who would all be missed. Anyway, Irene felt glad that her cousin was doing something more practical at the present moment than knitting white fleecy head-shawls, threaded with pale-blue ribbon.

Irene found plenty of work to do, being a very capable young woman, although she made a hopeless muddle of knitting, and she was kept busy all the summer and autumn.

She never forgot the De Carneys, and wrote several letters to people in France, but she got no answers for a long time. At last a letter she had written to the Mayor of Carney produced a post-card, on which was written in French :

‘MADEMOISELLE,—I regret that I have no information to give you of the family De Carney, as the château is shut up and the family have gone away.

‘MAYOR OF CARNEY.’

Long did Irene puzzle over this information. She had seen in the papers that the Germans had passed through Carney, but had now withdrawn, as they had from Ixe. Why the De Carneys had left their château, and where they had gone, she could not imagine. It seemed so odd that they should disappear without saying where they were going, or leaving any address. And how odd of the mayor, whom she had thought such a friendly little man, to write a curt post-card like that! Irene felt very uneasy, and wished she could hear something of the kindly old ladies and Maurice, to whom she had promised always to be a friend.

At last she decided to write again to Maurice, begging him to say how they all were, as she was very anxious about them. ‘I hear you have left the château. Are you or the aunts afraid of the Germans coming again? Because, if so, remember you will all

find a home and a welcome at Hill House,' she wound up her letter, which she posted to Château Carney, without, however, much expectation of its reaching the hands of Maurice de Carney. Nor was she surprised when weeks passed without any answer.

In fact, when Christmas Eve came—the saddest and dreariest Christmas Eve Irene had ever spent—she was startled to see Maurice's handwriting on a letter. 'At last a letter from Château Carney—at least, I mean from Maurice de Carney,' she exclaimed as she took up the letter at the breakfast-table.

Miss Mathers remained with the teapot poised in her hand. 'I am glad you have heard at last! I expect the posts have been disorganised, and his letters lost. What does he say? Did those dreadful Germans damage the château?' she asked.

'I don't know. I can't read this address. Where can he be writing from? It is in pencil, and so badly written!' said Irene, frowning over the letter.

'Oh, from the trenches, of course! All soldiers write in pencil,' observed Miss Mathers, going on with her dispensing of tea; but she stopped suddenly at a cry of dismay from Irene. 'My dear, what is it?' she asked.

'Oh Cousin Annie, I must go to France at once,' said Irene.

'Go to France! Are you mad, Irene? What for?' demanded her cousin.

'To help them. Oh, poor things! poor

things! They are in prison, lying on straw strewn over bricks. They will die! I know they will die!' cried Irene in excited tones.

Miss Mathers, startled out of her calm, put down her cup, and forgot her breakfast. She was a kindly woman, and when her sympathies were aroused she was always anxious and willing to help those in trouble; but she was not easily shaken out of her groove. 'Irene, who are in prison on bricks?' she inquired.

'The De Carneys—those poor old aunts, who are older than you; and Maurice,' explained Irene.

'In prison in Germany, poor things! But you cannot possibly go to them. You would not be allowed into Germany. If you tried to go, you would only be taken prisoner yourself at the frontier, and probably put into another camp far away from them,' argued her cousin, helping Irene to bacon with some vague idea of comforting her.

'They are not in Germany; they are in France, at Boulogne, and I am going straight over there,' declared Irene, taking up her cup of tea and drinking its contents down in gulps between hurried mouthfuls of bacon.

Miss Mathers had got over her first surprise and shock, and was mistress of herself. She said no more except a murmured, 'How dreadful!' and ate her breakfast calmly. She did not understand why the De Carneys, who were French people and gentlefolk, should be put in prison in France; but really in this war

such extraordinary things happened that one did not know what to expect. At all events, the great thing was at all costs to prevent Irene from doing anything so mad as cross the Channel.

Irene was reading the letter as she made her hasty breakfast, and presently Miss Mathers saw a tear drop on to the sheet of paper.

‘Perhaps it is all a mistake. They have been put in prison by mistake, and will be let out soon,’ she said soothingly.

‘Of course it’s a mistake; but they are not going to let them out. They are going to shoot them if I don’t go and prevent it,’ cried Irene, her tears dropping fast, and it took a good deal to make Irene cry.

‘Shoot them! Why?’ cried Miss Mathers.

‘Shoot them for being spies and traitors. Fancy, Maurice and his aunts!’ cried Irene.

‘Irene,’ said her cousin solemnly, ‘it is terrible, very terrible, and I am truly grieved for you, especially as they are in a way connections of yours—very distant, fortunately. But justice must be done, and you must try to bear it.’

Irene flashed an indignant look at her cousin. ‘You don’t know them, so there is some excuse for your talking like that; but I know them, and I know that they are innocent; and I also say justice must be done, and I am going to see that it is done, too.’

Miss Mathers looked mildly obstinate, as

she often did. 'You cannot possibly know that. I do not wish to hurt your feelings; but I have never liked what I have heard of Maurice de Carney; and though I am very grieved that he has come to this bad end, I do not see how you can interfere,' she declared.

'It is not very English-like to hit a man when he is down; and as for what you have heard of Maurice, it can't be anything bad, because I don't think he would do any one any harm to gain a million pounds! The boys did not like him, because he was not manly enough to please them; but that's nothing against him. Anyway, I am not going to argue with you about their innocence. I am going to prove it to you and to all the world,' said Irene.

'How are you going to do that?' demanded Miss Mathers with interest.

'You will see when you read the account of the court-martial, where I shall give evidence,' said Irene.

'Irene, I forbid it! I forbid you to leave England on any account until your brother has given you leave,' declared Miss Mathers.

'Cousin Annie, I am very sorry to go against your wishes'—Irene ignored the command—'but I think it my duty to go to that court-martial in France and give evidence for the De Carneys,' replied Irene.

Miss Mathers looked at her helplessly. 'I forbid you to go,' she repeated, though even

as she uttered it she knew that it was a futile command she was giving.

‘I am sorry you won’t help me, Cousin Annie, because it would make things easier. However, I am going,’ repeated Irene.

‘When, pray?’ inquired her cousin.

‘To-day,’ replied Irene.

CHAPTER XV.

DIFFICULTIES.

AS she said these words Irene got up from the breakfast-table, and, putting her table-napkin down with a determined pat by her plate, left the room.

Miss Mathers looked doubtfully after her for a moment, then helped herself to some heather honey, and proceeded leisurely to finish her breakfast, her thoughts divided between doubt as to whether what she was eating was heather honey or some substitute palmed off on her by Mr Biggs (in whom she had no longer any faith), and questionings as to how she was to prevent Irene from carrying out what she considered her mad scheme. But breakfast was ended and cleared away before her mind was made up upon the latter point; and then a thought flashed into her mind, and she went to seek her young cousin. She found her in her bedroom packing, a sight which did not surprise Miss Mathers, who well knew the girl's impetuous nature.

'Irene, has it occurred to you that you would be suspected of being a spy too, and perhaps even put into prison, if you went over to help these other spies?' observed Miss Mathers.

'Yes, it has occurred to me that I may be

put in prison. In fact, I think it more than likely; and I am going to take letters of recommendation with me. But I should be obliged if you would not call my friends spies, Cousin Annie,' replied Irene.

'If they are not spies or have done nothing wrong, why have they been put into prison?' demanded Miss Mathers.

Irene did not deign to answer this question, which it must be admitted was a very provoking one, as if being taken up as a spy were a proof of guilt, especially in these days of war, when suspicion is so easily aroused.

Miss Mathers was silent a moment, and then, as it began to be evident to her that Irene meant to go, she became tearful and slightly incoherent. 'Irene, I cannot let you go alone, and I simply dare not go to France with you. I dare say I am a coward; but, what with these dreadful submarines and things, they are certain to put me in prison, and it would kill me to be thrown into a dungeon on damp bricks,' she declared.

Irene's sense of humour was tickled, but she suppressed a desire to smile as she replied, 'I thought you said people were only put in prison if they were guilty. But don't worry. I know Boulogne quite well, and some English people who are there, and they will take care of me and see that I don't get into trouble. And I would much rather you did not come. You don't know French or French people, and you would be of much more use

here in England, in case I do want help, than you would be over there.'

'How can I help you if you are put into a French prison? Oh, how dreadful it all is! Oh, this wicked war! How have we got into this dreadful state, when everything was so happy and peaceful six months ago?' cried Miss Mathers.

'If I get put into prison don't worry,' began Irene.

Miss Mathers interrupted her indignantly. 'Do you imagine I am made of stone and feel nothing? If such a dreadful catastrophe occurred it would kill me! If I had known you were going to behave like this I should never have offered to come and take care of you!' And then, to Irene's surprise, she suddenly added, 'But as I have undertaken to take care of you I will do so. I will go to France with you.'

'No indeed, Cousin Annie, I won't have you,' cried Irene.

'That, my dear, is a matter for me to decide,' replied Miss Mathers with dignified decision, as she swept out of the room with quick, firm steps.

Irene did not for a moment believe she would go, nor did the girl intend to allow her to make that sacrifice, but she had too much to do to waste time arguing with her just then. She wanted to send off some telegrams, but first she sat down and read again the piteous letter Maurice had written from his prison cell.

‘Imagine me, Irene, thrown into prison, a battered wreck, after having been nearly torn to pieces by the crowd, manacled as if I were a criminal; I, the seigneur of Château Carney! And here, too, are my poor old aunts, all charged with being in league with the Germans, and having led them into Château Carney and shown them where water was to be found. Need I tell you we are innocent? Though how to prove it I do not know. Your last letter has been intercepted, as have all your telegrams; but a kind friend has just told me of them. This friend advises me to ask you to use any influence you can to help us, and will see that you get this letter. I am not afraid to die for my country, but to die as a traitor is terrible. You at least, Irene, will believe in me, even though all my friends have forsaken me,’ Maurice wound up.

Irene knitted her brows as she read the letter. What had become of Maurice’s fiancée? Surely the Du Chesnes had not turned against Maurice! The first thing was to send a telegram to the governor of the prison assuring him of the innocence of the De Carneys, and telling him she was coming over to give evidence at the court-martial. That would prevent Maurice being shot before she arrived—so she trusted, at least. While she was composing the telegram she heard a car come up to the door, and, looking out of her bedroom window, saw Miss Mathers get in. It was her own car; but Irene thought with irritation that

her cousin might have asked her if she could give her a lift, instead of obliging her to get on her mare or order out her car and drive it herself, as they had only one chauffeur. Finally she decided to cycle down to the post-office, and to find out at the same time about the trains.

Mr Biggs read the telegram with much perturbation. After clearing his throat he said diffidently, 'It's against all rules and regulations for me to know what's in a telegram, miss, except officially; but having known you from a baby, and looking upon you almost as a father might—if you'll excuse the liberty—might I ask if you really and truly intend to do what you say in this telegram?'

'I do indeed, Mr Biggs; and I am much obliged by the interest you take in me,' said Irene, holding out her hand.

Mr Biggs took it and held it in his own as he said, 'Oh Miss Irene, don't do it! You are going to certain death! Why, you are asking for trouble, mixing up with spies,' he wound up vehemently.

Irene sighed impatiently, 'They are *not* spies. Oh dear, how stupid people are! When I bring them back here with me, and you see what nice people they are, you'll be sorry you said such a thing,' she cried.

'It's you that will be sorry, miss. Not that there's any danger of their coming here, thank Heaven! for we don't want foreign——

Well, there, miss, we'll say no more about it; but you'll let me tear up this telegram, and we will make it a special matter for prayer at our meeting to-night, and ask that these poor French people may be helped in their trouble as seems best to the Almighty; and you stop quietly at home, where you will be safe,' urged Mr Biggs.

'I call that a mean way of getting out of doing one's duty—shifting it on to Providence! Besides, you know, Heaven helps those that help themselves, and I should not deserve to be helped if I stopped quietly at home and let Aunt Isabel's relations suffer unjustly. Mr Biggs, I am sure I am doing what mother would do if she were here, so please send off those telegrams, and don't try to stop me,' said Irene.

Mr Biggs sighed heavily. 'I sha'n't have a moment's quiet sleep till you come back,' he declared.

'Well, the trains and the Government keep you awake, anyhow, so I shall not feel that I am disturbing your rest,' declared Irene, as she went off to the station to inquire about her train.

Smith the stationmaster, never a genial person at the best of times, was unbearable now that 'times were worrying,' as he put it. 'With regard to the trains, miss, I can give you no information. They may run, or again they may not. This being a Government line, there's no telling,' he declared, pushing his

hat back and running his fingers through his hair in an irritated way.

‘Well, but surely there must be some train running to-day?’ protested Irene.

‘Oh yes, there are trains running. There’s one coming in now, if you’ll excuse me, miss; but whether it is the last for the day or not I can’t say. Can’t promise anything,’ he declared as he went off to see to his business of taking tickets and so on.

Irene looked after him in exasperation; seeing which, a young porter, who knew her well, came up, and, touching his hat with a grin, said, ‘It’s no good taking any notice of Smith, miss. He’s fair off his head with all these troop trains and alterations; but if you’ll tell me what train you want to catch, I’ll phone through to the terminus and hear if she’s running.’

‘I want the two o’clock to town,’ said Irene, after thanking the young man, who went off, and came back presently with the news that it was running.

With a sigh of relief, Irene mounted her bicycle and returned home.

‘Ah, Irene, the vicar is here. He is shocked at your determination to go to France just now,’ said her cousin when she went into the morning-room, and here she saw the vicar with a perturbed face sitting opposite to Miss Mathers, who looked rather triumphant.

Irene felt rather mischievous. ‘Oh, Mr Bellairs, how do you do? Have you been

arguing with Cousin Annie for trying to fill her larder with all the available provisions in the town?' she demanded.

'Oh, are you one of the thrifty housewives I have been preaching at, Miss Mathers?' demanded the vicar with a twinkle in his eye. 'Well, well, we parsons are sad bunglers when we try to put our neighbours right. But I hope you bear me no ill-will?' he added.

Miss Mathers stiffened a little as she replied, 'I understood that we were to discuss Irene's mad plan of going to Boulogne to appear before a French court-martial.'

'Yes, yes, to be sure. What is it all about, Irene?' asked the vicar.

Irene told him, adding, as she had said to Mr Biggs, that she was sure her mother would have wished it.

The vicar listened with grave interest, and, after asking her some questions and reading Maurice's letter, observed abruptly, 'I am not sure that the child is not right; and, as far as danger goes—well, we'll hope that she will not get into any. At this time no one must be a coward; and if she can help this poor fellow and his aunts by her evidence, why, I think she should do so.'

Miss Mathers's face was a study. 'Am I to understand that you deliberately advise Irene to go and run the risk of being shot as a spy? I am sorry I ever consulted you,' cried the good lady, thoroughly roused.

The vicar and Irene exchanged a smile, and then the former said gravely, 'I do not think she runs any such danger. I will write to the English chaplain, and ask him what he thinks.'

'But I can't wait for that. I must start to-day,' cried Irene.

'You won't be able to do that. You will have to get a passport. You will find that there are all sorts of ceremonies to go through before you cross the Channel nowadays,' said the vicar.

Irene stared blankly at the vicar. 'I forgot about a passport. I suppose it is necessary?' she asked doubtfully.

'Very necessary, I can assure you. No one is allowed out of England or into France without one,' he assured her, to her dismay.

'A very wise precaution!' said Miss Mathers with ill-concealed satisfaction at the thought that this journey might after all be put off and become unnecessary.

'But it is dreadful! I may be too late!' exclaimed Irene.

'In that case it would be no good our going,' observed Miss Mathers with alacrity.

But her remark was her undoing, for Irene said sharply, 'I am not going to be too late. They won't dare to do anything when they know two Englishwomen are coming from England to bear witness to the prisoners' innocence.'

'Two Englishwomen! I hope you are not under the delusion that I am going before a court-martial! I know nothing about these

people, and that is all I could say if I were asked. Nothing upon earth would induce me to go near a court-martial,' protested Miss Mathers.

The vicar's eyes twinkled. 'I foresee that I shall have to come and bear testimony to the innocence of two rash Englishwomen,' he said.

Miss Mathers let his unseemly facetiousness pass unnoticed, and said, 'What steps does one take to get a passport?'

The vicar explained that the Foreign Office gave them, and that they had to be viséd by the French Consul, and that it took two or three days.

'Then we had better go to town to-day,' cried Irene.

'My dear, impossible! It is Christmas Eve, remember,' protested her cousin.

'All the better. I shall be thankful not to spend Christmas Day here. If we are in London rushing about getting passports it won't feel like Christmas at all,' said Irene.

This was no inducement to Miss Mathers; but she resigned herself to her fate, and said to the vicar, 'You see the wild-cat expedition we are bound for. Will your wife be so kind as to give an eye to the house here? Martha is perfectly trustworthy and capable; but in these awful times I shall be glad to think she has some one to refer to in case of accidents.'

The vicar promised to do what he could, and went off to write to the English chaplain

at Boulogne, whom he begged to write by return to his London club; and Miss Mathers went upstairs to do the most hurried packing it had ever been her lot to accomplish.

After a hasty lunch Irene and Miss Mathers left to catch the two o'clock train to London.

At the quiet little station they were surprised to see the vicar and his wife and Mr Biggs. The vicar came forward and said, 'Mrs Bellairs insists upon my going up to town with you and interviewing the passport authorities.'

While Miss Mathers was expressing her gratitude to the vicar's wife for his kindness, Irene was talking to Mr Biggs, who had a large brown-paper parcel in his hand. 'Are you going to town too, Mr Biggs?' she asked.

'No, Miss Irene; I have no time for such jaunts; but I've brought some provisions for you. I hear you can get scarcely anything to eat in France to-day, and no matches for love or money, so I've put up a few articles I thought might be useful. Just a Christmas-box, if you'll accept it, as you used to do when you were a little girl,' he pleaded.

'I should think I would, Mr Biggs. *It is* kind of you,' cried Irene, 'though I don't think we shall starve in Boulogne.'

'Perhaps not, miss, but you never know. If you don't want them, you may find a lonely Tommy who could do with chocolate and milk,' he said.

The train came up. Mr Biggs carefully

hoisted his parcel on to the rack, and stood on the platform, his hat in his hand, till the train disappeared.

‘What is in that parcel, Irene?’ demanded Miss Mathers, looking none too pleased at having an extra piece of luggage to look after, and no maid to help.

‘A Christmas present from Mr Biggs. He used to give me boxes of chocolates when I was smaller,’ explained Irene.

Miss Mathers eyed it curiously. ‘It is a very enormous box of chocolates! And why has he brought it to the station? We don’t want to carry unnecessary things about with us!’ she objected.

‘It’s provisions, to save us from starving, as Mr Biggs hears food is scarce in France,’ said Irene, who thought this rather amusing, seeing that Boulogne was full of British troops.

Miss Mathers was no reader, as has been said, and she had a very vague idea of the state of affairs abroad. Consequently she believed this statement, which filled her with terror, and she exclaimed, ‘If food is scarce I don’t think we ought to go and add to the number of mouths to be fed!—Surely, Mr Bellairs, you do not think this journey ought to be persevered in?’ she demanded.

‘I think we ought to make all inquiries first, and you may be sure that if there were any shortage of food, passports would not be issued to Boulogne. But I believe the markets

are normal there. However, we shall see when we get to town; and if I find any danger attaches to this expedition I shall find means of stopping it,' he replied.

This calmed Miss Mathers so far that she took out her sock and began knitting; after which she became more cheerful, knitting always having a soothing effect upon her.

Irene, on the contrary, seemed to get more excited and impatient as she neared the metropolis, and when they reached the terminus she jumped up with a fervent, 'Thank goodness!'

CHAPTER XVI.

CROSSING THE CHANNEL.

‘I SHALL require your photos to attach to these passports, and duplicates to keep here,’ explained a tired but courteous clerk at the Foreign Office to Miss Mathers, to whom, as the elder of the two travellers, he addressed himself.

‘I have had no photo of myself taken for years,’ declared Miss Mathers, rather pleased each time a difficulty arose, though up to the present Irene had surmounted them, getting their passports hurried through, as she was on urgent business.

‘Mine are so big that they could not be attached to that passport,’ said Irene doubtfully.

‘They must be of small size, and be unmounted,’ explained the man.

‘But that will take days,’ cried Irene in despair. It was fortunate for Miss Mathers that her young cousin could not see the gleam of satisfaction that came into her face.

‘Is there any means of getting over this difficulty?’ inquired Mr Bellairs, who had been indefatigable in piloting them through the ceremonies to be gone through before leaving England.

‘No, sir; you must have your photos taken

to go abroad; but if it is very urgent, I can tell you where you could get them taken and developed in a day,' said the clerk.

'It is a matter of life and death,' put in Irene.

'Then, miss, if you'll take this card to the address I'm writing you'll get them delivered on Boxing Day by the first post, and you can start on Boxing Day at midday if you like to come and fetch your passports in the morning, and take them to the French Consul.'

'How kind people are when you are in trouble!' cried Irene when, after thanking the clerk, they had got into their taxi again to go to the address he had given them.

'Clapham Junction!' said the vicar, as he read out the address.

'Is that far? Have you time to come?' asked Irene.

'It is a good way; but I can do it easily, and take the train from there. Now that you have this business about the passports settled, you can go straight to the hotel till Boxing Day,' said the vicar.

Miss Mathers said nothing. The photos being procurable, nothing seemed likely to prevent their going to France on Boxing Day, and her spirits fell to zero. They were driving through a number of small streets which were unfamiliar to Miss Mathers, who gazed out on them with melancholy eyes.

'Here we are. This is the photographer who is to make us beautiful on our passports,'

cried Mr Bellairs cheerfully, as he helped Miss Mathers and Irene to alight.

‘I doubt if they will be recognisable,’ remarked Miss Mathers.

After they had both been photographed, the vicar, to their surprise, demanded to be done too. ‘It will save time in case I have to come over; so, if you want me, send a wire, and the next boat will bring me.’

‘I am much obliged, Mr Bellairs,’ said Miss Mathers so fervently that Irene nearly laughed. Instead she exclaimed, ‘I do wish you would not come, Cousin Annie. I must go, because I think it is my duty; but you need not come.’

‘Whether it is your duty to go or not I cannot say—you think you know best about that; but it is certainly mine to keep the promise I made your poor brothers to look after you—though I little knew what it would lead me into—and I am going to fulfil it,’ said Miss Mathers with the air of a martyr.

‘And I consider it my duty to look after all my flock, however far they stray, so I shall come up on Monday. I can get up in plenty of time to see you off; but if my clerical brother’s answer is unsatisfactory, and he advises your not going, I am sure that Irene will be guided by one who is on the spot and knows all the circumstances,’ said the vicar, looking at Irene for a word of agreement.

But Irene evaded a direct answer, only

saying, 'I will do what is right, Mr Bellairs;' with which reply they had to be content.

Miss Mathers spent the evening in writing innumerable letters. Irene found herself wondering whether she was warning all the recipients of her shawls that they might never get any more. She herself sat and read a book, or tried to do so.

On Christmas Day they both went to church, and had a kind of Christmas dinner at the hotel, and the day wore drearily on. On Boxing Day morning the photos duly arrived, and were brought to the breakfast-table on a tray.

Miss Mathers opened the packet and gazed in apparent stupefaction at its contents till Irene demanded what was the matter.

'My dear Irene, these photos are no good. I thought they would be unrecognisable, and they are,' she exclaimed, handing them over.

Irene laughed when she saw them. 'They are not flattering, but I could tell it was you. Anyway, my hat has come out well, and if we wear the same clothes it will be all right,' she said.

'I hope I do not resemble that wretched photo!' exclaimed Miss Mathers in offended tones.

'Not a bit; it is a very bad likeness of you; and I look like a Belgian refugee who has fled in a hurry and had a long journey. Perhaps we shall look more like them when we arrive at Boulogne,' suggested Irene.

This was not a comforting remark to make ; but Irene only meant that the passage might be rough.

However, as there was no time to demand a second sitting, the two took their photos to the Foreign Office to be stamped, and were greeted in a most friendly way by the clerk, who informed them that the likenesses were excellent ; on hearing which Irene carefully avoided looking at her cousin.

After a fatiguing struggle, twelve o'clock saw them back at the hotel with passports viséd and stamped with the dreadful photos, and there the vicar joined them cheerful as ever. 'I have brought you up a pile of Christmas cards and letters, and I have heard from Boulogne. Well, ladies, it is all right. The chaplain will call upon you at this hotel, where he has taken rooms for you,' he said, handing Miss Mathers an address.

Miss Mathers drew herself up. 'I do not think we have got as far as that ; and I should like to know something more before I decide to go to that or any other hotel,' she declared.

'Oh Cousin Annie, it is very kind of the chaplain ! Pray let us do as he advises. It will be nice to have some one friendly come to see us,' cried Irene.

'I have not been told yet that the chaplain advises us to go to Boulogne,' said Miss Mathers, who was certainly doing her duty rather grudgingly.

'I began at the wrong end of the story.

The chaplain says,' said Mr Bellairs, reading from a letter he took from his pocket: "'Of course you are aware that this is a much more serious affair to have to do with over here than at home, and I have made inquiries, and find that matters look black for your friends. If your parishioners can help them, in the name of Christianity let them come, and I will do all I can to help them.'"

Irene drew a long breath at this news, and Miss Mathers, finally resigning herself to her fate, handed her purse to Mr Bellairs that he might get their tickets. He was allowed to go no farther than the entrance to the platform, and said good-bye!

But Miss Mathers was not finished with her worries yet; and if anything could have turned Irene from her purpose it would have been the trouble Miss Mathers gave her and everybody else.

'Irene!' she exclaimed when they were turned from the platform into a kind of wooden compartment, 'what does this mean?'

'It means, mum, that you've got to have yourself and your effects searched,' said a rough-looking woman who was sitting on a roll-up of rugs.

Miss Mathers ignored her, and tried to walk out of the place, only to find her way barred by a civil but determined official. 'That's the way back to the station, if you wish to remain in England; but this is the

place of detention for passengers wishing to go to France,' he explained.

'Place of detention!' echoed Miss Mathers blankly, with some hazy idea that she was already in some kind of prison.

'It is all right, Cousin Annie,' cried Irene. 'We shall soon be let out.'

Just then a large and portly lady appeared at a rough wooden door and said, 'Kindly step forward, ladies. You two are together? Very well, I will examine you first. Now, please, your passports!' she said, rapidly examining them. 'Quite in order.—And now, Miss Mathers, why are you going to Boulogne?' she demanded in a brisk tone.

Poor Miss Mathers was so taken aback that she stammered, 'That is my business; it is quite private.'

'Nobody's business is private from me. Are you going to see friends in the army?' persisted the woman.

'No, they are in prison; they are spies,' said Miss Mathers, thoroughly flustered by this time.

'Spies! You don't expect me to let you through for such an object?' said the woman indignantly.

'I think I had better explain,' said Irene, holding her head high as she told the story, and vouching for her friends' innocence, which she meant to prove.

The woman searcher's face softened.

‘Have you any letters of introduction to prove what your object is?’ she asked.

Irene brought out Mr Bellairs’s letter, which the woman read very carefully and returned, saying, ‘Take my advice and hang on to that as long as you are abroad. It may help you if you get into a tight corner, and it’s a ticklish business on which you are going, I can tell you.’

‘There, Irene, I said so! Even this lady, who does not know us, tries to dissuade us,’ cried Miss Mathers.

‘I don’t say that. If this young lady has pluck enough to go through with it, I say go, and good luck go with you. But I think you have some letters in your bag, madam. Will you kindly let me see them?’ continued the woman.

‘They are only my Christmas letters and cards,’ replied Miss Mathers, making no attempt to show them.

The woman, having no time to waste, put her hand into the bag, and, taking out the letters, tore them open one after another, saying rapidly, ‘Card, with best wishes; letter, so sorry you cannot leave your cousin, trying weather—er—nothing in that,’ and so on all through Miss Mathers’s private correspondence, every now and again coming to some remark about Irene, which, either by chance or malice, she read aloud, much to Irene’s amusement.

After the first indignant movement forward

to stop her, Miss Mathers pursed up her lips and kept them shut as she sat with heightened colour on the uncomfortable bench. Nor did she open them again as long as they were in the 'place of detention,' where her carefully packed dressing-bag was ransacked ruthlessly by the energetic and thorough searcher.

Irene's irrepressible sense of humour was much tickled as she saw the woman sniffing at her cousin's scent-bottles and pomade, and reading every scrap of paper—cheque-book included. Her cousin's face of disgust added to the humour of the situation.

At last the examination was over, and they were at liberty to find their way to the train. They sat down in two corner seats of a first-class carriage for ladies, in another corner of which a flushed and annoyed-looking lady was busy arranging her hair with the aid of a hand-mirror.

Miss Mathers threw down with unusual force the illustrated papers with which Mr Bellairs had provided her, as she said, 'Insufferable insolence!'

'If you are alluding to that woman who has to examine lady passengers, I heartily agree with you,' said the lady, speaking with a strong foreign accent.

As a rule, Miss Mathers was chary of making friends with strangers; but to find a sympathiser was a great temptation, and she answered, 'I *am* speaking of her. Did she annoy you?'

‘Ah, but how! The impertinent person, she made me take down all my hair, and I can tell you that was no slight business. She thought it was false, or that it was stuffed with private papers, or at least she pretended she did. And I the wife of a Belgian officer! It is, as you say, insufferable,’ cried the lady.

The first part of the journey was spent by Miss Mathers and the Belgian officer’s wife in exchanging views on the way travellers were treated; and Irene, whose thoughts were occupied with the object on which she was bent, was glad that her cousin should find something to distract hers. At all events it left her at peace to try to make plans to help Maurice and the Demoiselles de Carney.

At last they were on board the boat, and Miss Mathers, who was a bad sailor, went to the saloon to lie down. Thither she was followed by the Belgian lady and Irene. Not that Irene was afraid of being seasick, but she did not like to leave her cousin, who was evidently beginning to be nervous again.

‘Irene,’ said Miss Mathers after they had been out to sea for some time, ‘what is the matter?’

Irene looked across at her cousin, who was lying down with her eyes shut, and replied, ‘Nothing is the matter that I know of, Cousin Annie.’

‘There’s something the matter with this boat. It is staggering,’ declared Miss Mathers, still with her eyes shut.

‘I—I think it is tacking,’ said Irene, who had got up to look out of a porthole. The boat gave a sudden lurch, throwing her against the Belgian lady.

‘I think it’s submarines we are dodging, as a young Englishman told me once,’ replied the Belgian.

Miss Mathers roused herself with alacrity. ‘Irene, help me to get on deck ; it is our only chance,’ she said ; but as she spoke she laid her head back on the cushion.

‘Don’t worry, Cousin Annie ; it’s all right. I can’t see any submarines. Besides, if there were danger the captain would call us up on deck,’ argued Irene.

‘You don’t see danger anywhere ! However, it doesn’t make any difference, for I could not get upstairs if my life did depend upon it,’ said Miss Mathers ; and Irene saw a tear roll down her cheek.

This was more than the girl could bear, and she went up on to the deck, which was crowded with khaki-clad figures. Taking a look round, she saw a kindly-looking sergeant standing near her, and suddenly going up to him, she said, ‘Would you be very kind and help an elderly lady up on deck ? She thinks we are being chased by submarines, and is too ill to get up the gangway on to the deck ?’

‘With pleasure, miss. My pal will give her a hand too. And as for submarines chasing us, I dare say they are, the beggars ; but I fancy we shall give them the slip,’ said the

sergeant, as he prepared to follow Irene down to the saloon.

‘Pray don’t say that to my cousin, or you will alarm her still more,’ urged Irene.

‘I’ll be tactful, miss,’ the man assured her, as, accompanied by his pal, he followed her down to Miss Mathers, who lay with her eyes shut.

She opened them, however, when she heard Irene’s voice, and gave a cry of alarm on seeing the two soldiers with her. ‘I’d rather drown at once,’ she said, being convinced that they had come to help her into a boat to save her from the sinking ship.

‘I hope you don’t mean you’d rather drown than allow us to help you into the fresh air, madam?’ said the sergeant.

‘Has it struck us yet?’ was Miss Mathers’s reply.

‘No, madam, and not likely to; but if you’ll take the advice of a sergeant in the R.A.M.C., you’ll come up on deck out of this hot cabin, which is enough to make any one imagine all sorts of things,’ said the man.

Miss Mathers looked at him, and his kindly face seemed to reassure her, for she tried to get up, and with the help of the two soldiers succeeded in getting on deck, where she admitted that she did feel better, and where, at all events, she felt safer.

At last they arrived at the other side of the Channel, and Irene, turning to her cousin, said with a smile, ‘One danger past, Cousin Annie. Here we are at Boulogne.’

‘Which is more than I ever expected,’ replied Miss Mathers, as she took a seat in the waiting-room and gazed out on the busy quay, which looked so dreary in the pouring rain.

Meanwhile Irene saw to the Customs.

‘People are kind. Fancy! they won’t charge duty for all those provisions Mr Biggs gave me,’ she exclaimed when she came back.

‘Why not? I hope you have not been bribing the officials, because I do not approve of that,’ remarked Miss Mathers.

‘Oh dear no. I don’t believe they would take a bribe. It is just kindness to English people—the *entente cordiale*, you know,’ Irene explained cheerily. ‘The kindness of the French people seemed to her a good omen, and she started off to see if the hotel omnibus was there.’

But Miss Mathers clutched her arm. ‘Pray do not go away. We must keep together. It would never do for us to lose each other,’ she cried.

Irene did not argue with her cousin; but, tucking her hand under her arm, she said, ‘Come along, then. I only wanted you to sit here out of the rain and cold. If the hotel bus is not here we’ll get into a cab, one of those rickety-looking victorias.’

There was no bus, so they got into a cab and drove off to the hotel, which was on the Grande Route to Calais.

Miss Mathers peered timidly out of the cab, and said in surprise, ‘Why, there

is a regiment of English soldiers marching along!’

‘Of course. Boulogne’s full of them,’ replied Irene.

‘So it seems,’ observed Miss Mathers very gravely.

‘It makes me feel so nice and safe,’ said Irene.

‘You generally do feel that. For my part, I think it looks as if we were in the danger zone,’ said Miss Mathers.

Irene might have retorted that Miss Mathers generally felt like that; but she was very sorry for her cousin, and could not help admiring her pluck in coming when she was so nervous. And at all events she had no time to reply, for they drove up at that moment to the Hôtel Darincourt, which was to be their headquarters for longer than they thought.

CHAPTER XVII.

BOULOGNE IN KHAKE.

WITH a nervous grip of her young cousin's arm, Miss Mathers got out of the rickety little cab, with its inadequate hood which let the rain drip on to the knees and feet of the fares under it.

'Mees Madders—two rooms? Yes, we await you. Your rooms are reserved for you,' said a smiling and courteous hall-porter.

Miss Mathers cheered up slightly at the well-ordered and prosperous appearance of the hotel, and especially at the sound of English all round her. True, all the male sex were in khaki; but that she had been beginning to get used to in England. When *table-d'hôte* was served, and every one seemed cheerful, and the dining-hall was lit up with pretty decorated electric lights, she resumed her placid appearance, and her forehead unpuckered.

The two stood for a moment waiting to be allotted seats at one of the tables, most of which were filled with officers of British, French, or Belgian regiments. Then a waiter came forward and said, 'A lady begs that you will do her the pleasure of sitting at her table,' and led them over to a small table where the Belgian officer's wife with whom they had travelled was seated.

‘This is charming,’ said Miss Mathers, smiling happily ; and to her great relief Irene found that her cousin had evidently got over her fears and trepidation, and was quite content to be in a comfortable hotel, even though it was in France.

‘There is plenty to eat and very excellent cooking,’ observed Miss Mathers, as she ate her fish and looked through the menu with appreciative eyes.

‘Naturally. It would not pay the proprietors to starve us, or to employ a bad cook,’ said Madame Boudin, for that was her name.

‘I was given to understand that there was a difficulty in getting food,’ explained Miss Mathers.

Madame Boudin laughed. ‘One is told all sorts of canards, which it is best to doubt. A foolish friend of mine actually told me that it is not safe to live in England, where I have left my boy at school, because the whole country is honeycombed with spies ; and that at a given signal they are going to blow up London and all the principal towns !’ she said.

‘My cousin does not think Boulogne a very safe place,’ remarked Irene, with a sly look at her cousin.

‘Safe ! It is as safe as any place in Europe, I should say ; but I think safety is not a thing it is wise to think about in these days, when one’s nearest and dearest are in hourly danger,’ said madame, growing grave for a moment.

They were lingering over their dessert,

chatting together, when a figure in khaki came towards them, led by a waiter, who said, 'The English priest wishes to see mesdames.'

The new-comer introduced himself as one of the chaplains to the forces. 'I must apologise for calling so late; but I have been so rushed all day—am every day—that I could not find a minute to come before. I hope you are comfortable here, and have nice rooms? That is right. It is a great thing to be comfortably housed and properly fed when one has strenuous work before one, and a very charitable work you have come to do,' he said, addressing Miss Mathers.

'I have nothing to do with it. I know nothing whatever of those people or the affair. I am simply here to look after my cousin, as far as possible,' said Miss Mathers.

The chaplain gave a keen glance at them both, took in the situation at a glance, and said, 'That is very good of you. We must both look after her, and you must promise to apply to me if you are in any difficulty or require any help at any time. If you have finished we might go into one of the drawing-rooms, and Miss Irene and I will have a talk together.'

When they got up from the table Irene laid her hand on the Belgian lady's arm and said in French very rapidly, 'Could you—would you be so kind as to engage my cousin in conversation, and keep her away from us? I want to speak to this gentleman.'

‘Certainly—yes, yes!’ said the Belgian good-naturedly; and after a few minutes’ conversation with Miss Mathers she invited her to come and see the Palm Court, where in happier days a band played and a fountain splashed.

‘And now to business,’ said the chaplain. ‘Are you not afraid to be mixing yourself up in this unpopular affair? For I must tell you it is unpopular, and you will share the unpopularity of those poor creatures. You must walk warily, or you will get into trouble.’

‘Oh, I don’t care a button about that,’ said Irene lightly.

‘That is very brave of you,’ said the chaplain.

‘On the contrary, it’s nothing of the sort. I beg your pardon for contradicting you; but it isn’t brave a bit, because I don’t seem to know what fear is, in that way, so I can’t be brave. The person who *is* brave is my cousin, who expected to be torpedoed all the time we were crossing, and is still in dread of being mixed up with these people and sharing their fate, and who yet insisted on coming,’ argued Irene.

‘I believe you are right. It is very good of her, especially as she is not young. But now about these people who are believed by every one to have helped the Germans to come to Carney. What do you think you can do?’ remarked the chaplain.

‘I can prove that they hate, and have

always hated, the Germans, and that they are innocent! innocent! innocent!’ cried Irene, and stopped suddenly to find that some French officers who were sitting at a table near were listening intently, and were exchanging glances.

The chaplain noticed this too, and observed, ‘Perhaps we are disturbing our neighbours. We must speak more softly;’ but he continued to question Irene about the matter, rather to her surprise, and she found herself rehearsing all the evidence she meant to give at the court-martial; and one word she repeated constantly, and that was the word ‘innocent!’ Afterwards, looking back upon her visit to Boulogne, it seemed to Irene that she had spent her time telling every one over and over again that the De Carneys were innocent! innocent! innocent!

When the chaplain had heard the whole story, and had repeated certain statements—why Irene could not imagine, especially as he spoke rather loudly in spite of his caution to her to speak low—he wound up, ‘And you want to visit them in prison?’

‘Yes, please, I want to go to-morrow morning as early as possible,’ she cried, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

‘Very good,’ said the chaplain, and gave her directions, after which he took his departure.

Irene, with the addresses the chaplain had given her tightly held in her hand, went to the

door with him, and then returned to search for her cousin, whom she eventually found in another *salon* seated by the fire knitting placidly at her khaki socks, while opposite to her and in front of the fire sat some young officers, who were sitting with their feet inside the fender, but who got up and pushed their chairs back when Irene appeared.

‘Don’t move! Pray don’t move! My cousin will excuse you.—They are cold, Irene; they have just come from the trenches,’ said Miss Mathers.

‘Then you will want a lot of thawing. Do go closer to the fire,’ Irene urged them.

Thus urged, the young men, with laughing apologies, drew in; while Miss Mathers, who was knitting at a great rate, gave them, in her gentle, placid way, advice about keeping their feet warm.

‘Really, Cousin Annie, you make me feel quite giddy. You are knitting at railway speed,’ said Irene at last, as the clicking of the needles or something seemed to annoy three English ladies who were sitting near.

‘I want to get these finished for this gentleman who is going to honour me by wearing them. I think they will keep his feet warmer than those hard things he is wearing,’ explained Miss Mathers.

‘Miss Mathers has been examining our socks, and highly disapproves of them; and certainly they cannot be compared with hers, which are deliciously soft and warm,’ said the

young officer spoken of, who evidently had become quite friendly with Miss Mathers.

Irene laughed ; and seeing the English ladies still looking askance at their circle, as she thought, she observed, 'I hope we are not disturbing you. Won't you come near the fire too ?'

'Oh no, thank you !' said one of them stiffly, and they turned their backs on Irene and conversed together in a distinctly unfriendly manner.

'British reserve,' thought Irene, and she began talking to the young officers about their regiments, and asking innocent questions about men she knew.

Suddenly one of the ladies above mentioned rose from her seat, and, crossing the room, came and stood near, and, addressing the young officers, said, 'You had better not give these strangers any information. I have good reasons for saying so.' And without waiting for an answer or giving Irene time to ask what she meant, the lady, accompanied by her two companions, swept from the room.

Irene flushed crimson, and Miss Mathers stopped her knitting, while the three young officers looked supremely uncomfortable.

'There, Irene ! I knew what it would be if you mixed yourself up with those spies. Now here am I, a loyal Englishwoman, suspected already ! It is too dreadful,' cried Miss Mathers.

One of the young officers, who had a very

clever face, and who had not opened his mouth all the evening, turned to Miss Mathers. 'No one with any sense would suspect you of disloyalty, madam; and as for those foolish, meddling women, you had better ignore them. You have not asked a single question about military matters, which they might have known, as they have been listening to every word that has been said. If you had, I should have objected, as I know the harm that can be done by careless talking of the movement of troops.—You have my entire sympathy in your mission to France,' he concluded, turning to Irene.

'Hear, hear!' said the other two; and the one who had made friends with Miss Mathers added, 'I never heard Bellairs make such a long speech before since I've known him; and though I don't know what your mission to France is, I also entirely sympathise with it.'

Fortunately the name by which he had called his companion attracted Miss Mathers's attention, and caused her to forget for the moment the unpleasant episode which had just occurred. 'Bellairs!' she exclaimed. 'Do you happen to be any relation to the Rev. Hugh Bellairs?'

'He is my uncle. Do you know him?' replied the lieutenant.

'Rather; he is our vicar. I suppose he told you for what purpose we were here?' said Irene, rather surprised at this, and also at the fact that the vicar had not mentioned that he

had a nephew at Boulogne, though he had said he had several nephews fighting.

‘Oh dear no. Uncle Hugh would not be likely to tell other people’s private affairs to me. I heard you talking to the padre this evening, and if I dared would advise you not to discuss that matter in public,’ explained the young man.

‘I wonder your uncle did not mention that you were at Boulogne,’ remarked Miss Mathers, who had resumed her knitting, and bid fair to make a record in sock-knitting.

Mr Bellairs smiled. ‘He could not mention the fact, for he did not know it. I am only here for the night, and am off again to-morrow morning. To tell you the truth, we three came in a motor to get a hot tub and a rest in sheets, and Providence threw us in your way to provide us with socks!’ he said, with a smile to Miss Mathers.

‘It is most fortunate that I had two finished pairs with me,’ said Miss Mathers, who had just triumphantly finished the third pair, which she handed to her new friend; the other two had already been provided with socks.

‘I will do some more for you, and leave them here,’ she explained as she bade them a cordial good-night.

‘Nice boys, weren’t they, Cousin Annie?’ said Irene, as she escorted her cousin to her bedroom, which was next her own.

‘Very nice gentlemanly young fellows. I must begin another pair of socks to-morrow

morning. And, Irene, I beg of you, do not mention your business here to any one. You heard what Mr Bellairs said, and you see what unpleasantness it has caused already,' pleaded her cousin.

'I promise you that. I can't quite understand the padre, as they call him, speaking of it before those French officers, who were quite near, and were evidently listening; and he must have spoken louder than he thought, for you see those ladies and that Mr Bellairs, whom I never noticed, heard him. I spoke very low after the first,' said Irene.

'It is such a pity that you feel it your duty to interfere in this unhappy affair, otherwise we might have quite a pleasant visit here. That Belgian lady is charming. She gave me an excellent *café au lait* in the Palm Court, and was most entertaining; and as her husband is a colonel on the king's staff, she is quite all right. I like seeing these young officers and being able to do something for them,' said Miss Mathers, whose feelings seemed mixed. On the whole she appeared to be rather enjoying her visit, in spite of the drawback of a court-martial looming ahead, with which, although she was firmly resolved not to go near it, she was mixed up, as she declared, by Irene's perverseness.

Poor Irene, on the contrary, was not in the mood to enjoy Boulogne or anything else at the present moment. She was thinking all the time, even when she talked of other things,

of the De Carneys lying on damp bricks in prison, and was only longing for the morning to come that she might go and visit them and try to comfort them. However, she was glad that Miss Mathers was in a way enjoying the change, though it made her feel how far apart they were from each other, and how little in sympathy they were.

Irene did not quite understand that Miss Mathers's recovered equanimity was partly due to the great relief she felt at finding that things were practically normal, and that she need not fear starvation or any other personal discomfort.

Irene, on the other hand, though she truly said that she did not know what fear was for herself, felt great fears for the safety of the unfortunate De Carneys, of whose case every one seemed to think very badly. Consequently, Irene's feelings as she went to bed were not so cheerful as her cousin's, though, to her own surprise, she went to sleep almost as soon as she laid her head on the pillow.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT THE PALAIS DE JUSTICE.

‘**M**ADEMOISELLE, your *café au lait*,’ said a voice which mingled with her dreams, and Irene opened her eyes to see a trim French waitress in frilled white cap standing smiling at her bedside with the little breakfast-tray in her hands.

Irene heaved a sigh, but sat up and said *bon jour* to the girl, who replied, ‘Mademoiselle is too young to wake with a sigh, though, alas! we all sigh more often now. But courage, mademoiselle; we will hope for the best.’

‘You mean about the war. I wasn’t thinking of that. Something is bothering me, and I forget it when I am asleep. That is the worst of waking up when you are—bothered,’ remarked Irene.

‘Ah yes, I know just what you mean. It is like putting a great heavy pack on one’s back which one took off at night. But still, courage! The back is made to the burden, and often the pack gets miraculously lighter as we go along,’ said the maid, throwing open the venetian shutters and arranging the curtains.

‘Why, there are palms growing outside my window! How can they bear this cold?’ cried Irene.

‘You are looking on the famous Palm Court. It is very pleasant in peace-time, when the band plays and one can recline on one’s couch and listen to it. Even now it is a nice room, and you get no outside air into your apartment,’ explained the maid.

Irene was not too pleased to hear this, as she liked fresh air; but, as it happened, this arrangement was very useful to her later on, and she blessed the chaplain’s wife for having chosen this room, as Irene heard afterwards she had done.

Miss Mathers had announced her intention of remaining in her room until lunch to recover from her fatigue of the day before, and Irene was only too glad, as it left her free to go to the Palais de Justice to get a permit from the military authorities to visit her friends.

After wandering through passage after passage, and climbing innumerable steps up a winding staircase, she at last came to the right room, and found two French officers sitting there, who rose and greeted her with surprised gaze.

Irene knew enough of France to be aware that it was not etiquette for a young girl to go to law courts alone; but she decided that the French of Boulogne must be used to English independence after seeing so many English girls in the Red Cross uniform flitting about the town. Anyway, nothing would induce Miss Mathers to come with her, and the overworked chaplain had no time.

When Irene mentioned her errand the faces of the two Frenchmen grew stern.

‘Impossible! I can allow no one to have access to those traitors,’ said one.

‘Monsieur, my friends are innocent,’ replied Irene.

‘This is the young English lady who is connected with the De Carney family, *mon capitaine*,’ said the other, at the same time giving his fellow-officer an astonishing amount of information about Irene.

‘Oh, I remember,’ said the captain, looking thoughtful.

‘How do you know all that?’ demanded Irene in amazement.

‘By your letters,’ replied the officer, with a slight smile at her frankness.

‘My letters! I never wrote to any of you in my life,’ answered Irene, looking straight at the officer with an offended air.

‘Mademoiselle, your letters to the prisoners were naturally seized, to be used in the trial,’ said he.

‘I never heard of such a thing!’ cried Irene.

By this time Irene’s youth and innocence were apparent to the two officers, and they became kinder and less suspicious in their manner.

At last, after questioning her a little, the captain said, ‘Well, mademoiselle, it is quite against the rules, but I will give you this permit, which you can take to the public

prosecutor and ask him to sign. I do not think he will; but at any rate it will satisfy you that we can do no more for you. It allows the holder to pay a visit to-day and to-morrow,' he explained as he drew out a paper and gave it to her.

'And after that I must come and get another paper? Can't I have a permanent permit to go and see them every day?' demanded Irene in an aggrieved tone.

The two Frenchmen looked first astonished at her cool request, and then evidently amused at her innocence and ignorance of the way things were managed in war-time.

'Mademoiselle, you forget these traitors have no right to receive any visits at all,' one of them said.

'Monsieur, you forget that these people are innocent, and that you have no right to speak of them in that—that cruel way till you have proved them guilty,' cried Irene indignantly.

'Mademoiselle!' expostulated the younger man.

'Don't talk to me. I am so angry that I think I had better go away before I say something you won't like to hear,' said Irene, facing them for a moment like an avenging fury, and then going out of the room.

'*Mon Dieu!* these English demoiselles! What they will do, and yet not lose their dignity!' cried the captain.

'She looked very handsome as she stood there and defied us—absolutely defied us, as

if we had no power at all!’ said the other, half-indignant and half-admiring her courage.

‘We have no power over her,’ said the captain.

‘I am not so sure! It is not too safe to come here as a friend of traitors. It might be well to keep her under observation, for many a spy has as innocent a face as she has,’ said the other, his suspicions rising again.

‘Oh yes, let us keep her under observation, by all means; but I do not think it will be difficult. She evidently intends to visit those people, and be in the prison daily, so that either she is playing a most audacious game, or she is (as she appears to me to be) a simple, innocent English girl with a generous desire to help these connections of her late aunt. To tell the truth, Dubois, I feel for the first time as if these De Carneys may be innocent,’ said the captain, knitting his brows.

‘So much for a pretty face!’ exclaimed Dubois with a smile.

‘Not at all. I have seen and tried’—the captain was a judge in civil life—‘many a beautiful criminal and pretty hypocrite, and I have never been taken in by any of them. But one learns to read faces and judge character in a law court, and I think I am safe in saying that the English “miss” who has just left us is what she appears to be,’ he said, speaking slowly and evidently weighing his words.

Dubois shrugged his shoulders. ‘You

know better than I. Perhaps I am a little prejudiced, because I do not care for these emancipated Englishwomen, who will throw themselves in front of a racehorse to a certain and horrible death for a wrong idea! It may be some such crooked idea of saving the lives of her friends—though she knows them to be traitors—that has brought her here,’ he said.

‘We shall see,’ said the captain, and resumed his work.

Irene meanwhile had gone off with her paper in her hand in search of the public prosecutor, whose office at last she found, after going downstairs and again through wrong passages till she came to the ground floor. Here she found a clerk, like every one else in French uniform, who took her unsigned permit and gave it to an officer sitting at a table, who merely glanced at her, but did not get up. ‘Impossible!’ he said, and went on reading a document which lay before him.

‘Monsieur, I wish to see three innocent friends of mine, relatives of my aunt, who have been put in prison by mistake,’ said Irene in a clear, ringing voice.

Behind a desk two officers who were hidden from her exchanged a smile, while the man she addressed, to his own annoyance, started visibly as he looked up and said, ‘How do you know that, mademoiselle?’

He was a gray-haired man, and Irene felt more at home with him. She came up to the table, and, standing with her hands resting on

it, told her story, which she always did in nearly the same words. 'It is impossible that people who annoyed me by their unreasonable hate of the Germans four years ago should turn against their country for no reason, and invite them to come and destroy their village,' Irene wound up.

'But, unfortunately, they have done so,' he replied gravely.

'Nonsense!' said Irene quite calmly.

There was an odd sound from behind the high desk, and then a kind of shocked silence. The gray-haired officer looked gravely at Irene. 'That is scarcely the way to address me, mademoiselle,' he said.

'No, it is not. I apologise. But really it is so worrying to have people contradicting me, as every one in this building has done, and it is so horrid coming here all alone and meeting only men, that I feel rather cross,' said Irene, and laughed in a shamefaced way.

The gray-haired man looked as grave as ever. 'Then why do you do it, mademoiselle? I agree with you that it is hardly seemly for you to come to this Palais de Justice alone. Why have you come to France? You would have been better advised to stop in England,' he said.

'I had to come, because I promised,' said Irene.

'Will you kindly explain?' he asked.

Irene hesitated, and then she told the story of her promise to Maurice's dying step-mother

and to Maurice himself. 'And so you see, monsieur, I was obliged to come,' she wound up.

'Yes, I see,' said the gray-haired man, and, stretching out his hand for the permit, he signed it and handed it to her.

'Oh, thank you!' cried Irene; and then, after looking at it, added, 'But it is only for two days! Can't I have one for a week or so at least? It is so disagreeable coming here and shocking you all by not having a chaperon. My elderly cousin won't come near you. She is afraid of being put in prison herself, and sleeps with her passport and letter of recommendation under her pillow,' she said, and laughed merrily now that she had gained her point.

The gray-haired man evidently had wonderful control of his features, for he did not smile as he inquired, 'And you, mademoiselle—have you no fear of that fate overtaking you?'

'Me!' cried Irene, opening her eyes. 'No. Why should you put me in prison, pray?' she demanded.

'It would not be so surprising,' he said quietly.

'Oh well, if you put me with the Demoiselles de Carney it would be one way of seeing them and comforting them, dear old ladies. Monsieur,' she added suddenly, 'have you ever seen them?'

'No, mademoiselle, I do not know them,' he replied.

‘Ah well, that accounts for this stupid mistake. I wish you would come with me and see them,’ she said.

‘That, mademoiselle, I regret to say, is impossible,’ he answered.

‘Then I had better go. Good-morning, monsieur; and thank you. And—I shall be very angry if you put me in prison; and I advise you not to, for they’ll make a fine fuss in the English papers if you put an innocent English girl in for nothing at all;’ and with a bow Irene left the office.

When the door was shut, and Irene’s quick, decided footsteps could be heard dying away, a burst of laughter came from behind the high desk.

‘Be quiet; she may hear you,’ said the gray-haired man.

‘But she is amusing, this English girl,’ said one of the hidden men, coming forward with a long sheet of paper in his hand. ‘She demands a season ticket for our prison as if it were a theatre, and invites you to go with her! What effrontery! I have taken down what she said, and her tale never varies. I am inclined to think she is that rare thing—a truthful woman. At any rate, she is a very courageous one. One cannot help admiring her. Nor is she brazen, although she is so independent.’

‘I trust she will come to no harm,’ said the older man.

‘I hope not; but if we find it necessary we

will clap her safely in prison in spite of her protests,' said the man who had been behind the desk.

'Remember, Chablous, I will not have her annoyed in any way; and if, after keeping her under observation, you find any suspicious circumstances, I wish to be told before she is arrested,' said the gray-haired man sharply.

'Certainly, Monsieur le Colonel,' said the other respectfully.

Meanwhile Monsieur le Colonel was reading the paper which the other had handed him. 'She did not say that; she said'—— he remarked, correcting the account the officer addressed as Chablous gave him.

'Oh well, I thought this word expressed what she meant better. She is a foreigner, you know,' Chablous explained.

'She speaks French excellently. Leave it as she said it, please,' said the gray-haired colonel, handing back the paper.

As he said this the door opened, and the officer who had given Irene the unsigned permit came in. 'Have you had a young English lady here?' he said.

'Yes. But why did you come in so cautiously? Did you think she was a dangerous character?' asked Chablous, laughing, but with rather a disagreeable laugh.

'Well, not exactly dangerous; but she has a temper, that young lady,' said the other, shaking his head.

‘So she told us! She also advised us not to put her in prison, or we should—regret it,’ observed Chablous.

‘She left us in a fury. I am inclined to think she is going to give us some trouble, that young lady. I wish, for her own sake, she had stayed in England,’ said the man from upstairs, who had a kind face.

Monsieur Chablous shrugged his shoulders. ‘If she gives trouble it is easy to put her out of the way of bothering us, and the English papers will never hear of it,’ he said.

‘I will not have her touched,’ said the colonel with abrupt sternness, and added, as he saw their surprise, ‘without my being consulted first, and signing the order.’

Again Monsieur Chablous agreed with a great show of respect; but the captain from the office upstairs looked at him uneasily. ‘I believe she is an innocent girl, and I have been reading her evidence and that of the villagers again, and I am inclined to believe she is the more truthful,’ he said.

‘She is the more attractive, a *belle fille!*’ said Monsieur Chablous with a disagreeable sneer.

And again the captain looked sharply at Monsieur Chablous, but said no more, though he mentally registered a determination to keep a kindly eye on Irene and a keen one on Chablous, who for some reason seemed inclined to be unfriendly to the English girl.

‘Whom are you employing to keep her under observation?’ asked the colonel.

Monsieur Chablous mentioned the name of a detective.

‘No, he will not do. Send Pigou. He will not be offensive, and I can trust him,’ said the colonel coldly, and the captain looked relieved, for the detective first mentioned was a disagreeable man, and very suspicious, and apt to arrest on very insufficient evidence.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE PRISON.

IRENE walked with her quick, decided steps along the Route de Calais until she came to the dreary walls of the still more dreary buildings which formed the military prison in which her friends were languishing. She rang the bell, and waited impatiently for an answer. Not for a moment did a thought of fear lest she might find herself detained here cross her mind. The one thought which possessed her was that she would soon see the De Carneys and comfort them.

The soldier who, after looking through the grating, unlocked the heavy doors stared at her with the same grave surprise that had greeted her everywhere that morning; but Irene held her head high, and, handing her permit to the man, asked to see the De Carneys.

The man said not a word, but, taking the paper, made a sign to her to follow him. It struck Irene again that one effect of this war was to turn the laughing, chattering French people into a grave, determined, and rather silent race.

‘A visitor for the prisoners De Carney,’ he called out as he reached the centre of the prison, a large, circular, cage-like room, into

which four corridors led, forming a cross. Down the corridors were doors on each side, which opened, Irene guessed, into the cells.

Some soldiers came out of two doors in the corridor she had just passed through. They stared at her, and repeated, 'A visitor for the De Carneys!' in surprised disapproval.

'For my friends the De Carneys,' said Irene with as dignified an air as she could put on, for she did not like the contemptuous way in which the soldiers uttered their name.

After a time and some conversation, a soldier took the permit away. On returning he said, 'The governor is out, but the sub-governor gives permission,' and took Irene into a dark room, where the first thing she did was to stumble over some hard round balls.

'Take care! This way,' said the soldier.

Irene, who was used to the courtesy of the French, missed the polite 'mademoiselle' in his speech. She was beginning to feel the 'unpopularity' which she had been warned awaited her. 'What are they? It is very dangerous to leave them there,' she said.

'They are loaves of bread,' he explained.

'Bread! I thought they were bombs!' she cried, and the man was unable to suppress a smile.

'Will you step in here?' he said, and opened a door which led into a cubicle the size of a telephone-box, which it greatly resembled, except that the walls all round and above

were iron gratings with wire netting between ; at least, so it seemed to Irene.

By the time she had discovered this a woman's harsh voice cried, 'The prisoners are ready ;' a shutter in a similar box or cell, divided from her by a passage, opened ; and Irene saw the white faces of two old women looking at her.

For a moment she was silent, and then she heard them cry in unison, 'Why, surely it is Mademoiselle Irene ! But how did you get here ? Are you in prison too ?'

'No, mesdemoiselles, dear mesdemoiselles. I have come to France to prove that you are innocent,' she cried when she had recovered from the shock of seeing these white-faced, ghastly-looking old ladies in place of the pleasant, happy-faced Demoiselles de Carney.

'Oh, how good, how kind of you ! Then you believe us innocent ?' they cried in touching tones.

'I don't believe it—I know it !' cried Irene in her clear voice.

'Ah, mademoiselle, it is noble and generous of you ; but you are too young to come here alone. Go home ; go back to England. You will be safer there,' they cried.

'I dare say I should be ; and I am going to take you there when this stupid mistake has been cleared up, and we shall take care of you and pet you, and you will forget all this miserable business.'

'Irene, that will be as the dear Lord wills.

I am quite, quite resigned,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

But for the first time her younger sister did not agree with her. 'I am not resigned, Irene. I am innocent, and I have never done any one any harm in my life. I have never willingly done a wrong thing to displease *le bon Dieu*, and I cannot see why I am punished like this,' she said, clutching the bars in her eagerness as she spoke.

'We have much to be thankful for, such a happy life as we have had. Ours is nearly ended, so what does it matter how or where we spend our last days? But Maurice! Can you do something for that innocent boy?' begged Mademoiselle Joséphine.

'I am going to get you all set free. Don't worry, Mademoiselle Joséphine. I'm going to interview every General and official in France before I'm finished, if necessary, and prove your innocence to them all,' cried Irene in cheery tones.

'My child, do be careful! These are perilous times,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

'I am going to be careful. Don't be afraid, mademoiselle; it will be all right. But you look pale. Have you been ill?'

'We have had rheumatism. I do not wish to complain; but we are not used to prison beds,' she replied.

'They are not beds; they are a few handfuls of straw thrown upon the hard floor, and we shiver there,' cried her sister.

Irene looked over their heads at the giant wardress who stood behind them. 'It will kill them, and you will be responsible for the death of two innocent people. May I send them blankets and beds, please, and invalid delicacies to eat? I am staying at Hôtel Darincourt, and the British chaplain will answer for my loyalty and honesty,' she said.

'It is against the rules to bring anything into the prison,' began the wardress, a big, hard-looking woman, as she stared back at Irene across the passage and through the gratings of the two cells.

But the soldier who was guarding Irene (or so she supposed), and who stood behind her, stepped forward, and, peering round her—for he was a short man and only came up to Irene's shoulders—said, 'If mademoiselle assures us that she is loyal to France, and wishes to send fruit or anything of that sort to the prisoners, there need be no difficulty—I will take that upon myself; and as for beds, if these prisoners suffer rheumatism, that we will see to. Mademoiselle can leave that to us.'

'Very well, I will come to-morrow and see you again, and bring some fruit. Think of what you would like best to have, mesdemoiselles,' she said, smiling at them.

'Ah, I long for grapes. My lips are parched. I think I have fever,' cried Mademoiselle Clémentine.

'Just to see you is the most refreshing sight

I can have,' replied Mademoiselle Joséphine in her gentle voice.

'Time is up,' said the wardress harshly.

'Good-bye, then, dear mesdemoiselles. Courage! I am going to see Maurice now. What message shall I give him from you?' asked Irene.

A grunt from the wardress and a slight exclamation from the soldier warned Irene that this also was against the rules; but she ignored the warning, as she did the fact that her request to see a young man would shock them horribly. 'Give him the message you have brought us—courage and hope—and our dear love,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

Then the shutter closed with a snap, and Irene turned to leave the cell. The bright and smiling face she had shown to the two old ladies clouded as her eyes filled with tears.

'Mademoiselle,' said the soldier, 'there is nothing about a visit to the prisoner Maurice de Carney on this permit.'

Irene looked at it. 'How stupid of that colonel! I said the De Carneys. He ought to have known that I should want to see them all,' she exclaimed.

'He would not imagine that mademoiselle wished to visit a monsieur,' said the soldier, who evidently did not imagine it either.

'Well, I do; so please let me see him,' said Irene coolly.

‘Mademoiselle, it is against the rules,’ he protested.

‘Never mind the rules. I really must see him. I have come all the way from England to see them all,’ said Irene.

The soldier said nothing, but, holding the permit in his hand so that no one could see what was written on it, he went to the circular space again, and said in a firm, rather bored voice, ‘The male prisoner De Carney to be brought to the visitors’ room.’

‘I hope it is not so dark as the other, or strewn with bullets of bread,’ said Irene.

The soldier smiled. ‘It is not so comfortable as Hôtel Darincourt,’ he replied as he threw open the door. The name of the hotel, which was one of the best and most expensive in Boulogne, had evidently impressed him, because he was less brusque than he had been at the beginning.

As they were standing there a young prisoner in the regulation black clothes of the prison passed the door, looking neither to right nor left. The soldier looked curiously at Irene. ‘The male prisoner De Carney is known to you?’ he said.

‘Of course! I have known him all my life. My aunt was his step-mother, and idolised him, and taught me to call him cousin,’ explained Irene.

‘Nevertheless he has passed you within a few yards, and you did not appear to recognise him,’ he replied.

Irene stared at him incredulously. ‘Impossible! That stooping, shuffling man with a beard Maurice de Carney! the young seigneur of Château Carney! Oh no!’ she cried.

The soldier, touched by her distress, said, ‘The prison air does not suit most people; but if, as you say, they are innocent, and you can prove it, he will soon recover his youth and spirits;’ and he opened a cell exactly like the one in the female prisoners’ room.

In a minute the shutter of the cell opposite was thrown open, and the bearded face of Maurice de Carney appeared. ‘Ah, Irene! I knew you would come,’ he said.

For one moment old memories of the happy days at Carney almost overcame Irene; but she clenched her hands tight and smiled at him as she said, ‘Of course I came, dear Maurice.’

‘Mademoiselle, I regret, but you must speak French,’ interrupted the soldier, for they had addressed each other in English.

‘Certainly; it is all the same to me, and I have nothing to say that I mind your hearing. —Now, Maurice, let me speak quickly, for I have a great deal to say and to ask. First of all, the aunts send a message of courage and hope, and their love. I have just seen them, and am going to see you all again to-morrow, and by that time just think of all the things you want me to do to get evidence for the court-martial.’

‘Ah, the court-martial! Irene, I can never face it. You do not know what it is to be howled at and beaten by an infuriated crowd. I have been so wounded. I am not strong enough to bear it,’ cried Maurice.

‘Don’t worry about that, Maurice. If the French soldiers can’t protect you, I’ll get a regiment of our English ones. Boulogne is full of them,’ cried Irene in scornful tones.

‘Mademoiselle!’ the two soldiers who were present protested angrily.

Irene looked haughtily first at the one behind Maurice and then at the one behind her. ‘Did you speak to me?’ she asked, and somehow, though she was in the wrong legally, neither of them had a word to say, and she continued her conversation with Maurice. ‘How did this mistake arise? What made them suspect you of anything so idiotic as being friendly to the Germans?’

Maurice passed a thin white hand wearily over his forehead. ‘I seem to forget. Oh Irene, I wish they would just stand me against the wall to-morrow morning and shoot me, and so end it,’ he said in a hopeless voice.

Irene stamped her foot. ‘They sha’n’t, Maurice. I am here to help you to prove your innocence for your mother’s sake. Now answer me quickly. What is the charge against you?’

Her vehemence roused Maurice, who replied, ‘That fiend who frightened you in our woods came to the château disguised, and

asked my help, as my dead mother's brother, saying he would save the château if I let his soldiers in. I refused, of course; but I allowed him to go on his promising to return to his lines; and then I sent warning to the Mayor by Louis. But he broke his promise, caught old Louis—he guessed what I would do—and took him a prisoner; and they invaded Carney, as you know. Then the villagers talked, and said they saw bright lights in the west wing, which we kept locked up, at sunset, and that they were a signal to the Germans, for they came that night,' he explained in a hopeless tone.

'The west wing! That was the wing Aunt Isabel had!' said Irene, remembering that her aunt had died there.

'Yes. I have kept her rooms as they were, and the wing has been locked ever since she died. I can't think who could have got in to signal from those windows, or how they could have got in to light it all up,' said Maurice.

Irene thought a moment, and then said in excitement, 'I know, Maurice!'

Involuntarily the two soldiers pressed forward. The case was beginning to interest them, and like the officers, and indeed every one who came across Irene, they were struck with her evident truthfulness, and influenced by her strong faith in the innocence of the prisoners.

'What, Irene? What do you know?'

asked Maurice, a gleam of hope in his eyes as he clutched the bars of his cell.

‘Don’t you remember how I once thought the château was on fire, and you laughed and said it was the sunset?’ she said.

Maurice gave an exclamation. ‘Yes, I remember! No doubt it was the reflection of the setting sun that the villagers saw,’ he cried with animation, and then added despairingly, ‘But how can we prove it? Every one believes we are traitors.’

‘No, they don’t. I don’t. I know you are loyal and true patriots. I must get some one at Carney to watch the windows when the sun is setting. The curé would, perhaps,’ said Irene rather doubtfully, as the curé had not been on good terms with Madame de Carney, who had been a Protestant, and had brought Maurice up as one.

‘Mademoiselle, time is up,’ said the soldier behind Irene almost regretfully, for he was interested in the conversation, and life was not bright in the prison.

‘Thank you, I will go.—Cheer up, Maurice. You see we have cleared up one charge against you. Write down all you can remember by to-morrow, and we will clear them all up, and you will soon be free,’ she cried.

‘Do you really think so, Irene?’ he asked anxiously.

‘No, I don’t think so; I am sure of it. They must set innocent people free when

their innocence is proved,' she declared ; and, smiling brightly at Maurice, she went off, as the shutter clicked and shut him from her sight.

'I should never have recognised him—never!' she said to the soldier, as he let her out of the prison.

CHAPTER XX.

ENTER ERNEST.

LOOKING at her watch as she turned into the Route de Calais, Irene saw that she had only a quarter of an hour to get back to lunch. She began to hurry her steps, when, to her surprise, a motor with two officers in khaki which had just passed her stopped a few yards ahead, and one of the two jumped out and came towards her.

Irene, whose face was set and grave, looked in surprise at the stranger, who was evidently coming to speak to her. She saw that he was a padre, but did not know him.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, saluting, ‘but I saw you look at your watch, and guessed you were in a hurry to get to the hotel. I am staying there too, and could give you a lift if you like. I saw you at *table-d’hôte* last night,’ he explained.

‘Thank you, I should be much obliged, as I am rather late; but I did not see you yesterday. It is very kind of you to trouble about a stranger,’ said Irene, as she got into the car without troubling her head about the unconventionality of her action.

‘You are not quite a stranger to me. The chaplain you were talking to last night told me about you and your mission, which

interests me greatly. You have been to the prison, I see. I hope you were able to comfort your poor friends?' he said kindly.

'Don't!' said Irene, clenching her hands tightly, and added, 'I must not break down, please.'

The chaplain glanced at her, and saw that she was putting a great restraint on herself to avoid a violent fit of crying. 'I should not have suspected you of being silly and hysterical,' he said quietly.

His words braced Irene, as he had meant they should. 'I'm not!' she declared indignantly. 'It was only seeing them looking so ill and miserable, and my cousin so changed and so hopeless that I actually did not know him.'

'The French are like that, easily elated and easily depressed. It has been a painful morning for you; but you must be sensible. "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength,"' he quoted.

Irene laughed. 'I haven't been very quiet to-day. I believe the military authorities will be inclined to acquit them just to get rid of me soon. I have had to bother I don't know how many of them already, and I shall have to go on bothering them, and I can't help saying what comes into my head,' said Irene, giving an account of her interviews with the officials at the Palais de Justice, at which her new friend, who listened with interest, laughed heartily.

‘I should try to be very polite, and very serious. The French like people to be in earnest, and if you are doing a deed of charity you must not let Mrs Grundy trouble you. Remember, if I can ever be of use, I am at your service,’ he said, jumping down as they arrived at the hotel, to find the luncheon-gong sounding.

Miss Mathers was looking out of the window, and her face, as she saw Irene step out of a well-appointed motor in company with a clergyman of the Church of England and a gray-haired colonel, cleared visibly. ‘There you are, Irene, at last! I was beginning to be anxious about you; but you seem to have been enjoying yourself. Who are your friends?’ she asked.

‘Mr Lawes-Lawe, one of the chaplains here, and his brother, Colonel Lawes-Lawe,’ said Irene, to whom the chaplain had given his card, as he introduced himself and his elder brother.

‘I did not know you knew anybody here, but I am glad of it. That chaplain has a church-window face,’ observed Miss Mathers, leading the way to the *salle à manger*.

Irene laughed. ‘He does look rather like a medieval saint, but he has a sense of humour, thank goodness!’

They sat down at their table, where they found the Belgian lady, who welcomed them pleasantly, and said, ‘There is a fourth place laid here. The waiter tells me an English

officer has asked to be put at our table! I expect some young lieutenant has fallen a victim to mademoiselle's *beaux yeux*,' she said with a laugh.

'It is very impertinent of him.—Irene, you are not to speak to him when he comes. I shall ignore him,' said Miss Mathers, looking very stiff and repellent.

Irene, whose seat faced towards the door, laughed lightly and said, 'Here he comes, and I shall certainly talk to him. I like him already;' and she pushed his chair ready for him.

Miss Mathers, whose back was turned towards the approaching intruder, drew herself up and looked as forbidding as she could.

'How nice of you to come to our table!' cried Irene; and Miss Mathers thawed rapidly as the padre with the 'church-window face' took the fourth seat at their table.

'May I introduce you to my cousin, Miss Mathers, and Madame Boudin?' said Irene, whose eyes were dancing with mischief.

'I am very glad to make your acquaintance,' said Miss Mathers, quite unaware what fervour she put into her words; the fact being, as the chaplain guessed, that she was thankful to meet some one who might be depended upon in case of need.

'I too am glad to meet congenial compatriots. I do not speak French, in spite of having learnt it for years at school. There are few English civilians here, and a man of

peace is sometimes glad not to hear military talk for a time,' he said.

It did not take him long to discover that Miss Mathers ignored Irene's mission. She did not allude to her doings of the morning, and persisted in talking as if Irene had spent the hours motoring, and asked if there were pretty drives she could take in the neighbourhood.

'I am afraid you will not be allowed to drive along in the country outside the gates; no one is without a permit, and then only on business. I should advise you not to ask, as the French resent our trying to enjoy ourselves and taking pleasure-drives in this serious time,' he observed.

'Yes, indeed; and I think I had better warn you not to play the piano, unless it is religious music, for a young English lady came over for a Red Cross dance, and began to play jigs, and she was requested to stop,' put in the Belgian.

'I think that is going too far,' said Miss Mathers.

'Anyway, I don't feel like playing jigs or any other kind of music,' said Irene; and then, feeling that she was looking too grave, she gave herself a mental shake and smiled.

After lunch, as they were sitting in one of the drawing-rooms, the three ladies who had warned the young officers against them came into the room, and, seeing the Misses Mathers, were going to withdraw; but a young woman

who was with them said in a loud tone, ‘Oh, here is a piano. Let’s stop here, and I’ll give you some music.’

Irene, who was reading, did not look up, and Miss Mathers continued her writing. She felt more comfortable since Mr Lawes-Lawe, whose name as a great preacher was known to her, had made friends with Irene, and had come to sit at her table. Privately she thought it rather bad manners of this girl to play the piano—which she did very badly—without finding out if other people objected, and she hoped she would be stopped.

However, for ten minutes she continued to play noisy waltzes and two-steps, and finally broke out into a music-hall song; whereupon the door opened and madame the proprietress appeared and stood there scowling at her. After glancing round the room, and seeing that Miss Mathers and Irene at least were not enjoying it, while the Belgian lady looked annoyed, she went up to the piano and said, ‘Madame, pardon me, but we do not play the piano in war-time.’

The young married lady turned round in surprise. ‘Why not, pray?’ she asked.

‘Because we do not think it seemly to be making merry while our dear ones are dying daily for us, and there is sorrow and suffering all round us,’ said the proprietress indignantly.

‘My playing won’t hurt them, and it amuses me. I am sure Boulogne is dull enough! No picture palaces, no theatres, no nothing.

I will go to another hotel if I can't even play the piano here,' exclaimed the young lady.

'That madame is at liberty to do. Shall I consider your rooms vacant after to-day?' asked the proprietress quietly.

'Certainly,' said the lady who had warned the officers against the Mathers. 'We do not care for the company here;' and, so saying, with a significant glance at Miss Mathers and Irene, she swept from the room, followed by the rest of her party.

The proprietress looked after them scornfully. 'Pretty manners those! We are well rid of them. They have been tiresome ever since they arrived, and can have no heart. They are not serious, though they pretend to be helping the Red Cross. I trust they have not annoyed you, mesdames. Pay no attention to them,' she said to Miss Mathers, who had coloured at the lady's insulting words and looks.

'I have no complaint to make; but you do not think they will really leave?' observed Miss Mathers, who feared the proprietress might lose four visitors.

Madame gave a short laugh. 'I think they will, for I shall require their rooms. I am booked up, and could fill three hundred rooms instead of two, and I do not care to keep clients who make themselves unpleasant to my other visitors,' she remarked, and went away.

'Dear me, she is very independent!' said Miss Mathers, mentally concluding that it would be as well to avoid offending her. This

conclusion was confirmed later on when she saw the four ladies standing in the hall, with a quantity of luggage round them, while madame sat at her desk receipting their bills, without paying them the compliment of coming out to see them off.

‘They are gone, mademoiselle; and if any one annoys you let me know, that is all. I will get rid of them,’ she said to Irene, who passed through the hall shortly after.

‘Thank you; but I don’t bother about what people say of me; and I should advise you not to, or perhaps you will empty your hotel,’ replied Irene with a laugh. She guessed that the proprietress knew her errand, though she did not choose to speak of it.

‘I am not afraid, mademoiselle. You have already many friends in the hotel, and I hope, if I can be of service to you, that you will command me,’ said the proprietress in a friendly way.

‘You are very kind. I am very grateful to you,’ said Irene with feeling.

‘On the contrary, mademoiselle, it is we who are grateful to you British for coming here in such numbers to help us,’ replied the proprietress.

Irene knew that it was not of the British in the hotel that she spoke, but of the boys in khaki, whom the Frenchwomen one and all loved and mothered.

‘We are all fighting for the same cause, madame,’ said Irene, passing on.

‘Stay, mademoiselle,’ said madame, who had just received a huge batch of letters from the postman; ‘I think this is for you. You have friends at the front?’ she asked with friendly curiosity.

‘I don’t know about their being at the front; but I have a sailor brother—oh yes, this is from him—and a soldier brother, but he is in India just now,’ said Irene.

‘Oh, is he?’ said a voice; and, turning round, she saw the astonished but smiling face of her brother Ernest.

‘Ernest! oh Ernest! why are you here?’ she cried in tones of regret, though she hugged him tight.

Ernest laughed. ‘It would be more to the point to ask what you are doing here. I very nearly went to Hill House, and missed you; but luckily wired from Marseilles. Old Bellairs wired back that you were here, but why on earth I can’t imagine.’

Meanwhile madame was looking on and listening with sympathetic but keen curiosity.

Irene, noticing this, said to her, ‘This is my brother, madame, come to fight for you too. I thought he was safe in India.’

Ernest saluted and shook hands with madame as he said, ‘We won’t talk of safety till we have rid France of our common enemies;’ by which tactful speech he made a staunch friend of the worthy proprietress. Then Irene carried him off to have a talk.

At the end of a long *tête-à-tête* Ernest said,

‘No, you could not have done otherwise ; but, upon my word, Irene, I hope to goodness the fellow is as innocent as you believe.’

‘Ernest, how can you?’ cried Irene indignantly.

‘Well, my dear, it is no use blinking the fact that he has bad blood in him, and it always comes out, sooner or later,’ said he.

‘Pray what bad blood are you talking about ? His uncle looked to me a very brave man and a gentleman, and I believe his mother was a sweet and gentle little woman who loved France for her husband’s sake,’ protested Irene.

‘I don’t trust any one with German blood. Their idea of patriotism is to be treacherous to every other nation, however well they are treated by it, when it suits them or they can benefit their own beastly Fatherland,’ declared Ernest.

‘You’d do the same for your country,’ said Irene.

‘I beg your pardon. I should do nothing of the kind. I’ll fight for her to my last breath, and I’d spy for her in war-time if I were ordered to do so, though I’d rather not ; but I should never deliberately earn my living in a country and accept kindness and hospitality, and be a traitor to her all the time. As for Maurice, I’m awfully sorry for him and for the old aunts, of course ; but they must have done something to get into this mess,’ said young Captain Mathers stubbornly.

‘You are like Cousin Annie, who says

people who are put in prison must be traitors,' retorted Irene.

'They must be suspicious characters,' persisted her brother.

'You would not talk like that if you had seen them this morning, poor things! I did not recognise Maurice, he was so changed,' said Irene.

'How did you see him? You have not been to the prison?' cried her brother with evident disapproval.

'Of course I have, and I am going to-morrow. I wish you would come too, Ernest; it might do good, and make those stupid French officers believe they are innocent,' said Irene.

'I should not think of doing such a thing. It would be very bad form in my uniform! Besides, I don't want them to believe anything but the truth. French officers are by no means stupid. They are jolly clever, and you had much better leave this business alone, and not meddle with such things. It is great impertinence on your part to come over here and tell all those French officials that they are wrong, and that you know better than they do, when you were in England all the time, and know nothing of what Maurice has been doing these last years. Take my advice, Irene; chuck this business, and come back to England with me to-morrow,' he urged finally.

'I think brothers are the most disappointing things in the world!' said Irene slowly and thoughtfully.

Ernest laughed carelessly. 'Well, don't you be disappointing too, but come along with me. We can all cross to-morrow morning.'

'I can't; but can't you stay here for a few days?' she asked.

'No, I am afraid I can't. You see, I must go to Grace'—his fiancée—'and I don't know whether we shall not get married. It would be such a good excuse for not having a lot of fuss and trouble,' he said.

'I should like to be at your wedding, and I'll come over for the day, but I must come back here,' said Irene.

'Well, let us go and see Cousin Annie now. I must thank her for taking such care of you,' said Ernest cheerfully.

Miss Mathers greeted him effusively. 'I do hope you do not blame me for letting Irene come here on this dreadful business,' she began.

'I should think not, Cousin Annie. I know Irene too well to imagine that any one can stop her when she has made up her mind to a thing. It was very good of you to come over with her; and now I am going to take you both back with me to see me married to Grace,' he said, smiling.

'Oh, dear Ernest, I am so glad! I trust you will be happy. How delightful to have wedding festivities instead of this dreary hotel!' cried Miss Mathers, all smiles.

'Oh, come, I call this hotel rather a decent place!' said Ernest.

‘As far as cooking and comfort go it is; but they won’t even allow a piano to be played, and I do like music,’ objected Miss Mathers.

‘We’ll have the organ at my wedding, though I am afraid there won’t be much in the way of festivities. Anyway, you had better pack up and get ready, for we shall start at eleven o’clock,’ said Ernest.

‘I can’t start at eleven. To-morrow I have an appointment which will take me till nearly one,’ said Irene with decision.

Her brother knew her well enough to know that it was no use arguing with her when she spoke in that tone, so he said, ‘Very well, we must go by the afternoon boat, and I must wire to Grace.’ And he went off to do so.

‘I am so glad to be going home again, and to know you are safely out of this business, Irene,’ said Miss Mathers.

‘I am not going to be safely out of this business until my friends are safely out too,’ said Irene.

Miss Mathers said nothing. Now that Captain Mathers was home she felt that her responsibility was ended, and consoled herself with the thought that once they got Irene home, they could prevent her coming over again.

CHAPTER XXI.

BACK IN BOULOGNE.

‘**Y**OU must go to the Mairie to get a permit to leave the country,’ said madame, who heard of their intended departure without saying a word.

‘Oh dear me! those tiresome permits! How glad I shall be to be back in England, where people do not need them!’ cried Miss Mathers, ignoring the fact that she had needed a permit in the shape of a passport to leave England.

Irene went to get her permit, and then to the prison, where she found all three prisoners much cheered, especially when she held up for their inspection the chocolate and *café au lait* in tins which she had brought them, as well as cakes and biscuits of all sorts.

‘And now I shall not see you for two or three days. Keep up your spirits and eat as much as you can, so that you may look better when I next see you,’ she said to the old ladies.

Maurice did not take much notice of the eatables or the cigarettes she had brought him. All he asked over and over again was, ‘Irene, do you think there is any hope for us?’

‘I know it, Maurice. I am quite sure it is all right,’ she repeated; and at last the strained

look left his face, and he smiled back to her as she left the cell.

It was a great rush to get off; but Irene found time to say to madame, 'I am coming back in a few days. Keep a room for me, will you?'

Madame nodded as a pleased look came into her face. 'Your rooms shall be ready for you and your cousin,' she replied.

'I—I am afraid she won't come again. Will you mind having me alone?' Irene asked anxiously.

'No, no; you shall be taken care of, and the Belgian lady will chaperon you at meals,' said madame.

Miss Mathers was almost frivolous in her joy at being back safely in England, and quite excited at the prospect of the wedding, which was arranged for the next day, as Ernest had only a week's leave before rejoining his regiment.

'Irene, I have been thinking things over, and I have decided that it is impossible for you to go back to France,' said Ernest, just before his wedding. 'Don't interrupt me; I may never ask you a favour again. Why not write out all your evidence, make a sworn statement before a lawyer or some one, and send it to Boulogne? You have been to see these people, who after all are not related to you, and have no claim upon you; and you can send money to buy them food, if necessary, though I can't understand where

Maurice's money has gone. Now I consider you have done more than could possibly be expected of you.'

'I'd give a good deal to please you, Ernest; but I must go,' said Irene.

'There's no "must" in the case,' he retorted.

'Yes, there is. I promised Maurice,' she replied.

Ernest shrugged his shoulders. 'I thought you did not care for the fellow. Besides, he's engaged to another girl, isn't he?' he asked.

'Yes; and I shall be obliged if you will believe me when I say that I am simply doing what I think is my duty to Aunt Isabel's relatives, and that I am not in love with any one, least of all poor Maurice!' said Irene.

'I don't like it at all, and I don't think it is fair to Cousin Annie to drag her across the Channel again,' said Ernest.

'Nor do I. I wish you would tell her to stop at home and look after Hill House for us. There is that Belgian officer's wife whom you met at *table-d'hôte*; she promised to chaperon me at the hotel, and the proprietress says she will look after me,' said Irene.

'Well, there's one thing; the place is full of British, and that chaplain seems a decent sort; but he may be called away any day. However, have your way; and if you get into a hole don't blame me. I sha'n't be able to help you, for I shall be in the trenches,' said Ernest.

'Anyway, I shall be nearer to you there

than I should be here,' said Irene, as this thought struck her.

'That isn't much consolation. I sha'n't be able to come and see you, although I *may* be only twenty miles off,' he said.

When she had said good-bye to Ernest and his bride, who went off for their brief honeymoon, Irene felt tempted for a moment to give up her mission in France. Ernest had been so affectionate, and he and Grace had both said that they wished she would remain at Hill House, where Grace was going to stay with them for the present; but she never really wavered in her intention to go back, although to please them she decided to stay at home for a few days.

But the next day she received a letter, in strange handwriting and with the postmark London, which altered her plans. The letter was written in French, and, translated, ran as follows: 'Mademoiselle, out of pity for the prisoners De Carney, in whom you take an interest, I write to tell you that your departure has done them harm in the sight of the authorities, who have been told that your brother does not believe in their innocence, and has convinced you that they are guilty, and that you have forsaken them in consequence. Maurice de Carney is completely prostrated, and has given up hope. If you can send the affidavit of which your brother spoke, please do so as soon as possible, and write a cheering letter to them. A British

soldier whom I know is kindly taking this letter to post in London. I can only sign myself "A Friend."

'Read that,' said Irene, handing the letter to Miss Mathers, who read it with puckered brow, and sighed.

'Dear me, Irene, what a troublesome business this is! Do write and cheer them up, and send the affidavit. That can't harm you; and you see even this person, whoever he is, does not expect you to do more than write a kind letter,' said Miss Mathers.

Irene finally gave up trying to enlist her cousin's sympathies in the fate of the poor De Carneys, and simply replied, 'I am going to cross to France as soon as the consul has viséd my passport, which will probably be to-morrow. I must go to town to-night. Good-bye, Cousin Annie. Thank you for coming with me last time. I am really relieved that you can't come this time; and as you know Hôtel Darincourt, and that I shall be quite safe there, you will not worry about me.'

'Irene, you cannot be serious! We are just settled here comfortably, and you want to go tearing off to that dreadful place again! I shall be dreadfully anxious. You remember how those English ladies warned our own British officers against us, and you may have that kind of thing again. And then there is Grace, your sister-in-law—you owe her some attention. She will expect you to be at

Hill House to welcome her,' protested Miss Mathers.

'Then the sooner she learns not to expect anything from me the better! She didn't marry me, and nobody consulted me about making her my sister-in-law! She is very nice, no doubt; but I don't owe her any attention beyond going to the wedding and being nice and friendly to her. Brothers are trying enough, but when it comes to having brothers' wives to bother about it's time to strike,' wound up Irene petulantly, for she was worried, and it was trying to have to go against everybody.

Miss Mathers sighed. There seemed to be nothing she could say; she felt quite unfit to cope with the situation, and Ernest had relieved her of all obligation to follow Irene in her erratic course. She felt under no necessity to face the dangers of the deep and a foreign land, and she let Irene depart alone, though she did not feel quite comfortable in doing so.

There was something curious in the smile with which the hall-porter and the maids met Irene when she reappeared at Hôtel Darincourt; and even madame, though she welcomed her kindly, seemed surprised.

'No, mademoiselle, I knew you would come, and have kept your old room for you; only I did not expect you until after the New Year. There are festivities at this time in England, I know; and then the brother's wedding.'

'Oh, we married him all right, madame,

It does not take long in war-time, and we are not so festive in England as you seem to suppose. Besides, I have business here, as I dare say you know,' Irene replied with meaning.

'It is best for one in my position to know nothing of the business of my *clientèle*, for their sake as well as my own, if mademoiselle will pardon me,' said the proprietress.

Irene laughed as she went to find the Belgian lady.

'My dear Irene, if I may call you so, for it makes me more your chaperon, I am delighted to see you back,' she said, as she threw her arms round Irene.

'Of course! Please do; and I will call you my aunt,' she replied.

'That is excellent. Now we stand or fall together; but you must forgive the aunt for running away for two days just to see her husband at the front, will you not?' she asked.

'Do they allow you to go to the front?' cried Irene.

'We do it, and I take my husband clean linen to his dug-out, and a few comforts which he much needs,' explained the Belgian.

'Are you not afraid of the shells?' asked Irene.

'As to that, an aeroplane might drop a bomb here. I have had my house in Belgium shelled while I was in it, so I am used to that. Besides, to see one's husband one risks a good deal,' said the Belgian lady.

'I am glad you happened to be here when

I arrived, my aunt,' said Irene smilingly, speaking in French, of course.

'To tell the truth, it was the padre who asked me to wait a couple of days. He was absolutely certain you would be back within a week, and said it would be better for me to be here,' replied the Belgian as they went down to *table-d'hôte* together.

There was the usual chatter and hum of voices when they entered; but even Irene, who was not self-conscious as a rule, noticed the sudden silence that fell upon a good many tables as she passed to her own. She heard a young French officer say, '*Tiens!* lost a louis,' and guessed that he had betted against her return.

'Madame,' she said after she had greeted the padre with a grateful smile, 'have I changed colour at all?'

'Not one bit. I admire you. What *aplomb* and dignity! Are you really only twenty, Irene?'

'I was only nineteen a year ago, but I am forty to-day, my aunt,' she replied.

'You will be twenty-one next year,' said the padre.

Irene entertained them with accounts of the wedding and the bride, and said with a laugh, 'Grace wanted to come back as far as Boulogne with Ernest when he goes to the front, and to wait here in case he is wounded; but he doesn't like French people—never did, so she has to stop in England.'

The French officers at the next table, who pretended to be engrossed with their food, were obviously listening; and Irene, who had taken a dislike to them, especially to one with a disagreeable laugh, and meant them to hear, continued to make remarks for their benefit, although she simply seemed to be entertaining her two fellow-diners, and appeared just to be in good spirits.

Next day she presented herself at the Palais de Justice for another permit, and went through the same process as before.

‘Mademoiselle Mathers! But I thought you had returned to England!’ said the captain.

‘The boats run both ways, monsieur,’ said Irene dryly.

‘You would have done well to remain at home,’ he said gravely.

‘May I have my form to get signed?’ said Irene stiffly.

The officer gave it to her, adding, ‘You will not get it signed. The feeling is stronger than ever against the prisoners.’

‘Indeed! What have they done now? Have they made more signals to the Germans by ordering the sun to shine on those west windows?’ demanded Irene sarcastically.

Both officers looked up. ‘What is it that you say?’ they asked.

‘Nothing. Wait till the court-martial and you will hear a good deal,’ said Irene grimly, as she bowed and left them.

The officers looked at each other. 'If that piece of evidence falls through, the case is weakened. I should not wonder now if she won the day,' the captain said slowly, and added, 'and she deserves it.'

'I wish her success with all my heart; I avow it freely. This bulldog tenacity, so English—they make good allies,' the other agreed.

The colonel looked up sharply. 'You are back, and want a permit?' he asked in evident surprise when Irene appeared before him.

'Yes, monsieur; and I want to see the old ladies in a proper room, please. It is too sad to see refined and innocent old ladies in a cell with a horrid grating between, especially on New Year's Day. When you find out at the court-martial that they are innocent you will be sorry to have treated them so badly,' said Irene.

The grave, impassive colonel listened politely to what she had to say. He had lost his only son in the war, and if Irene had but known it, she had struck the right chord, for the stern father often wished he had been more lenient to his son's youthful follies. He took the permit and wrote something on it.

'And, please, monsieur, put down Maurice de Carney's name too. He wants cheering more than the aunts, for he is a weaker character,' said Irene.

'Weak and easily led?' suggested the colonel as he wrote.

‘No, weak and obstinate. But I will say this for Maurice, though he is not plucky like an English boy, and my brothers did not care for him, he is a good boy. He was well brought up by my aunt, and he would not do wrong, and you know it is too silly to accuse him of German sympathies when he has always been as prejudiced and anti-German as the rest of you,’ said Irene.

‘You are not anti-German, then, mademoiselle?’ he said.

‘Not wholesale. I’d kill those men who ill-treated the Belgians myself; but I believe there are lots of Germans who are just as good as you,’ said Irene; and then a flicker of a smile passed over the colonel’s face.

‘You are convinced of the innocence of this family?’ he said.

‘Just as certain as I am of my own,’ replied Irene, in evident belief that this was beyond doubt.

The old colonel leant forward in a confidential way. ‘Now tell me, mademoiselle, why you are exciting yourself like this to help French people who are not related to you, against the wishes of your family. It causes comment and surprise,’ he said.

‘Certainly, monsieur, if you will tell me just why my brother is off to live in a hole on the French frontier to defend France, for which he does not care a button, and where we have lost so many of our brave boys,’ said Irene, her voice vibrating with suppressed feeling.

‘Mademoiselle, we acknowledge our indebtedness to your nation, and we know that your brother comes like the rest of the army to stand up for freedom and the oppressed nation of Belgium, as she gave her word that she would do,’ he replied.

‘Monsieur, you have answered yourself,’ said Irene.

‘What promise have you given?’ he asked; and Irene told him of her promise to her dying aunt and to Maurice.

The colonel handed her the permit. ‘You may see your friends in a room; but do not speak quite so unguardedly as you do here,’ he said reprovingly.

‘Monsieur, I am sorry; but I seem perfectly incapable of suppressing what is in my head. It comes out of itself,’ she assured him earnestly, and then coloured as she heard a laugh from the other side of the high desk behind the colonel’s table.

CHAPTER XXII.

IRENE MAKES PROGRESS.

WITH quick steps Irene hurried down the corridor, with the result that a soldier stopped her and said, 'Pardon, mademoiselle; what is the haste?'

'I want to see some sick friends in prison,' she said impatiently.

'Ah, the English mees!' he murmured, and let her pass.

Irene almost flew to the prison, and when she got there showed her permit. The soldier read it and said, 'I fear the male prisoner is too ill to see you.'

'Give him this in hot water'—it was strong beef-tea, one of Mr Biggs's gifts—'and tell him to drink it,' said Irene, as if the prison were a nursing-home.

The man looked dubiously at it. 'Mademoiselle is without doubt a nurse, and might come and see him in his cell,' he suggested. His brother had been nursed by an English Red Cross nurse, so he was used to English girls doing what French girls would never be allowed to do.

'Give me boiling water, please, then,' said Irene, and she soon had a bowl of hot beef-tea ready. Putting a biscuit in the plate, she followed her guide to the cell where Maurice

lay with his eyes shut.—‘Maurice, wake up; it is Irene come to make you well,’ she said. ‘Drink this for your mother’s sake.’

‘I am going to join *maman*,’ he said, half-wandering.

‘Not yet, Maurice. You must take care of the aunts for a while, and prove your innocence before all the world, and then fight for France—your beloved France. Ernest is fighting too,’ said Irene in brisk, encouraging tones.

Maurice opened his eyes and said, ‘You, Irene! I thought’——

‘Never mind what you thought; make haste and get well. And a Happy New Year to you, Maurice!’

Maurice gave a mirthless laugh.

‘It has begun well by my being allowed to visit you like this,’ said Irene.

‘Yes, monsieur,’ said the soldier. ‘It is a great favour that the colonel has granted in his own handwriting. It argues well for you and your cause.’

Maurice roused a little at this. A word of encouragement from one of the taciturn and formerly unfriendly soldiers had more effect than all Irene’s cheery optimism. ‘I thank you for your sympathy. I hope one day to show you that it was not misplaced,’ he said in a weak voice.

However, Irene stood over him and made him drink every drop of the beef-tea, and left him a slab of chocolate.

‘It’s English, Maurice, and sure to be good.

French things, of course'—— began Irene, and stopped, delighted to hear Maurice's soft laugh for the first time since he had been in prison.

'You must excuse my cousin; she is very frank,' he explained.

'Mademoiselle is your cousin?' said the soldier, surprised.

'Not really; it was my aunt's fault,' she said, and explained how the mistake arose, winding up, 'His father and all the family hated the Germans, so they would not acknowledge the wife's relations, and they did not want Maurice to know the truth; and a nice scene I had with him when they told him he was not half English, as he thought.'

The soldier listened attentively. 'That explains a great deal, mademoiselle. I see now why you have come to help these poor people. You must say all this at the court-martial; and if they believe you—and I think they will—you will win your case,' he said.

At this moment he was called by some one outside, and with a word of apology he left.

'It is unheard of, a prisoner being left alone; they must think I am innocent,' said Maurice.

Irene had said in fun that she was forty, but she might have said in earnest that the peril of her friends had sharpened her wits and given her wisdom beyond her years. In a moment she guessed the truth—that the man had purposely been withdrawn to let them talk freely, in the fond belief that no one could

overhear them. Determined that Maurice should not say anything which might be misunderstood, and that since the authorities wanted information they should have it, she took the conversation in hand.

‘Now, Maurice, listen; you are too weak to talk, so I must. First of all, we have cleared up that affair of the signalling. It was the setting sun, of course; and I am going to write to the curé and get him to watch the sunsets. I told them this at the Palais de Justice to-day. They might have guessed it if they had not wanted to believe evil (as most people do), and listened to the slander of the villagers. Now what other stupid slander can we disprove?’

‘Louis—old Louis—they say, has gone over to the enemy; but I am sure he is a prisoner. But you can’t prove that,’ said Maurice.

‘Won’t I? I’ll get the British Consul to write for me—or the American Consul rather, for of course we have no communication with Huns. Poor Louis! I must get a letter to him and cheer him up. He will be so unhappy about you. I do hope they are treating him well.’

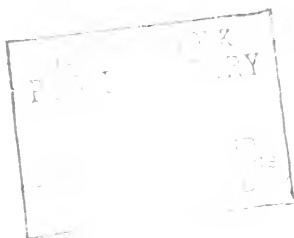
‘You need not hope that. They are brutal to their poor French prisoners. I doubt it will kill Louis,’ said Maurice.

‘They are not all so bad, Maurice; and, unhappily for us, it is the English to whom they are most cruel,’ said Irene.

At this juncture the soldier, evidently having



‘Maurice, wake up; it is Irene,’ she said.



heard nothing but some home-truths, came back, and if Irene had doubted his object before, she would have guessed it now by his shamefaced expression.

‘I must go. I have a lot to do. Did you ever hear the story of the slanderer who was cured by being told to pick up the feathers of a goose, and could not, and so saw how she could never undo the harm caused by the slanders she had spread about? Well, I am trying to pick up feathers spread by geese,’ observed Irene, as she walked along the corridor to the women’s reception-room.

A tall man in uniform was at a door, but withdrew at her words. ‘Mademoiselle, I beg you to be cautious. That was the governor of the prison,’ cried the soldier, horrified.

‘Well, what then? I am only speaking the truth! You don’t object to the truth in France, do you?’ she said.

The soldier gave it up, and exchanged shrugs and smiles with the soldiers he passed. Irene did not seem to see any of them. The fact was, she was wound up. She knew she was fighting for the life of Maurice, and for the freedom, if not the lives, of the old ladies. Her fighting blood was up, and she did things she could not have done in normal times. She was very sympathetic, and her sympathies were aroused, as they had never been before in her life, by the troubles of the De Carney family. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright as she stepped into the

dark room where the two old ladies awaited her. 'Like an angel of light!' one of the soldiers said afterwards.

'Mesdemoiselles, my dear friends, don't cry! See, this is one step nearer freedom. You will soon be out. I have come to wish you a Happy New Year. And here are some violets; they smell so sweet,' cried Irene, kissing the aunts again and again.

'Flowers are not permitted in the prison,' said the wardress.

Irene took no notice of her as she tucked them in the old ladies' woollen shawls. 'Push them in there,' she said, and then talked to them both as cheerfully as she could.

'Maurice is ill. He eats nothing. He will die,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine.

'Not he; he has decided to live and take care of you. I have been feeding him,' said Irene, and told the story of her interview.

'Irene, I begin to believe you really will save us,' said Mademoiselle Joséphine, as hope began to dawn in her.

'Of course I will. Well, good-bye till to-morrow. I am coming to see you every day I am in Boulogne till the trial, and then we will go to England together,' said Irene as she went off.

When she got back to the hotel she reported herself to the Belgian lady, who was the only one to whom she spoke of the trial, except the padre who sat at their table.

'I am so sorry I must go away this after-

noon ; but I have a chance of a lift in a motor-car nearly all the way, and the padre will take care of you, although I do not like your being at *table-d'hôte* without me,' said the Belgian.

'I have an idea. I will consult the padre about it, and see what he says. I may go away for these two days too,' said Irene.

'Well, be careful and look out for traps. You have one enemy—a French officer who hates the De Carneys,' said madame.

'Much I care! I'll beat him yet. *Au revoir*, madame,' replied Irene.

The padre was in the writing-room smoking and looking very tired ; but he cheered up at sight of Irene. 'What progress?' he asked, putting a chair for her opposite his own.

'A lot ; but, oh ! I have a lot to do, and I want your advice,' she announced.

'Impossible!' exclaimed he, with a twinkle in his eye.

Irene laughed. 'Yes, I do ;' and she told him all her ideas, summing up as follows : 'These are the things I have to do to win. I must get evidence of the sunset reflected on the windows, looking like signals ; I must prove that old Louis is a prisoner in Germany, not a traitor ; and I must try to get Maurice de Carney's fiancée to believe in him and stand by his side.'

The padre raised his eyebrows. 'A tall order that last !'

'I know ; but the thing is that it will do so much good. The Du Chesnes are in Paris,

and I thought of going to see them, if I can get a permit to travel there. Do you think I could go alone?’

The padre considered. ‘We’ll get you an escort. I know of a lady who is going to Paris to-morrow. Come along; it just fits in;’ and, tired as he was, he got up and took his hat.

Irene, who had never taken hers off, went with him. ‘I am afraid I am bothering you, and you have so much to do besides,’ she said apologetically.

He laid a hand on her arm. ‘Do not credit me with less charity than you have yourself. We are both glad to work for those poor prisoners;’ and he took Irene to a large house overlooking the quay.

‘Here, Lady Breck, I have brought you a travelling companion;’ and he explained Irene’s errand.

The lady, a very handsome woman, looked with smiling sympathy at Irene. ‘I am so glad to meet you. I have heard all about you. Now you must both come to dinner to-night; and to-morrow, after your visit to the prison, we must start,’ she said.

And so they did. But Irene did not mention to the prisoners where she was going when she explained that she would not be able to come next day, as she was busy collecting evidence.

Lady Breck took Irene to one of the best hotels in Paris (which, to Irene’s surprise, was close to the Du Chesnes’ *hôtel*, as the French

aristocracy call their town houses), and asked her to come with her to the French Red Cross Hospital, for which she had brought stores and a large donation.

‘Let me carry some of these bundles of bandages. It is so nice to feel one is helping the wounded a little,’ said Irene; and Lady Breck gave her a large parcel.

She was armed with this as she was going up the steps of the hospital, when she caught sight of a familiar face coming along the corridor, and cried, ‘Marie.’

The French girl, who was in the dress of a Red Cross Sister, stopped for a moment, and then exclaimed, ‘Irene! you here helping our poor wounded! How good of you!’ and kissed her.

‘May I introduce you to my friend Lady Breck?’ said Irene; and Marie came forward, and, bowing, said, ‘Our benefactress! This lady has collected so much money for us; and now you bring bandages and drugs. I am so grateful!’

‘Come back and lunch with us; you look tired, and a rest will do you good,’ said Lady Breck kindly. And Marie accepted the invitation, after asking leave of the Sister in charge.

After lunch the kindly lady left Irene and Marie together; and when she came back later on she found them sitting side by side on the couch, with signs of tears on the face of Marie, who had evidently been won over to Irene and Maurice’s side.

‘Lady Breck, will you chaperon Marie to Boulogne?’ asked Irene with her usual directness.

‘With pleasure. I hope that means that Mademoiselle Marie is going to help us to free the dear prisoners,’ said Lady Breck, smiling.

‘If my parents allow me. True, papa and Jean are at the front; but mamma must be asked. She is doing Red Cross nursing too.’

Lady Breck offered to speak to Madame du Chesne; and as she had ‘a way with her,’ and bore down opposition eventually, Madame du Chesne allowed Marie to be carried off, on the understanding that she stayed with Lady Breck, and that her mother would fetch her back the next week.

‘We will both come down for the trial. I have since felt that we judged too quickly; but in that moment of panic, when we were surrounded by spies and traitors, we were horrified to find a half German amongst us, and that we had been deceived. But Jean never believed in Maurice’s guilt, or in that of his aunts,’ said Madame du Chesne.

‘I thought Jean would have too much sense!’ said Irene, without considering that this was scarcely complimentary to the rest of the Du Chesne family, who *had* believed in it.

‘Well, what progress?’ said the padre when Irene came to *table-d’hôte* accompanied by the Belgian lady, who had returned just before.

‘A lot. One item is off my programme,

and Marie is here.' And she told the tale to the interested padre.

'Providence is helping you!' he said gravely, as he listened.

'Yes, I see that too, because everything has fitted in so well—meeting Lady Breck, and then Marie at her hospital. She was really glad to come, so it was not very difficult to persuade her, as she likes Maurice, though I call her rather a worm of a fiancée,' said Irene, candid as usual.

The padre laughed. 'We are not all Jeanne d'Arcs,' he said.

'Mercifully. Too many heroines would make the world uninhabitable,' said the Belgian lady.

'And yet there are a great many heroines to-day. Your nation has provided its quota, madame,' said the padre.

'Oh, we! We only do our duty,' she replied lightly.

'Precisely; but duty nowadays sometimes requires some heroism to do it,' he replied in his quiet tone.

Irene had lowered her voice when she told of her doings in Paris, so that the news of Marie's arrival was unknown until Lady Breck accompanied her and Irene to the Palais de Justice next morning.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PLOT.

‘PADRE,’ said Irene next morning when she met the chaplain at lunch, and had a minute to talk to him before the French officers came in and made her secretly careful what she said, though she seemed to be talking recklessly, ‘I am enjoying myself! While you are all thinking me a heroine, I am revelling in dramatic *coups* in which I score each time.’

‘I see by your eyes that you have been up to some mischief. What is it now?’ he asked, looking amused.

‘Nothing. It is the faces of those officers at the Palais de Justice when, after hearing again that I had departed, and breathing freely, they saw me “bob up” once more with Marie de Chesne, countenanced by a peeress of the realm—I did not know she was such a great personage until to-day.’

‘How did Maurice greet her? His delight must have been nice to see,’ said the padre.

‘Oh, Maurice! he is stupid. He very nearly spoilt everything,’ said Irene, her face falling. ‘I did not quite score there. He was quite cool, and upbraided her with not having faith in him; and she had to beg and pray to be forgiven! It was a good thing it

was not I, and so I told him ! Fancy, he contrasted her with me ! Could you imagine such idiocy ?' she wound up.

The padre did not reply. He was apparently studying the menu. 'And are they reconciled now ?' he inquired.

'Yes, thank goodness ! And Marie is going to use all the influence she has to get her dear martyred fiancé acquitted.' And Irene laughed with some scorn.

'Well, that is one item in the programme to be ticked off as done. How about the treacherous sunset ?' he asked.

'Oh, I wrote to the Mayor, and by luck—or, well, really I suppose it was providential—the letter arrived in the evening ; and he looked out of the window, and, lo ! there was the sun signalling away from the west windows of Château Carney. He wrote back a penitent letter, owning that he had condemned too hastily. I think I'll take that letter to the Palais de Justice, and flourish it in their faces when I go to-morrow.' Irene laughed, and added, 'They must be sick of me ; but it is their own fault. I asked for a permanent permit to visit the prison, but they will not give me one, and insist upon my renewing the permit every other day. So on their heads be it.'

That same day, however, Irene had a wire from Ernest to say he was passing through, and asking if she would meet him at the boat.

Irene had an idea,

Ernest was looking very cheery, and was optimistic about the war and his safety, and seemed especially pleased to see Irene.

‘By the way, do you know Marie du Chesne, Maurice’s fiancée? No. Well, she is here, staying with Lady Breck. She is convinced now of his innocence, and has been to see him. So has Lady Breck. You are out of the fashion with your suspicions,’ said Irene in a would-be indifferent tone.

‘I don’t know anything about it. I hope he is innocent, poor fellow!’ said Ernest, whom marriage had softened.

‘Then it’s a pity you did them all so much harm by openly speaking of him as guilty,’ retorted Irene.

‘I! Openly speaking! What do you mean?’ demanded Ernest.

‘Some one overheard you talking to me last time, and I got this letter,’ explained Irene, pulling it out of the pocket-book in which she kept her passport, permit, and other important papers, without which she never stirred out of the house.

Ernest was honestly distressed. ‘I’m awfully sorry, Irene! I’d no idea these beggars were spying on us. I’ll go to the Palais de Justice with you now if you like, and say I know nothing,’ began Ernest.

But Irene interrupted him. ‘If you want to help me, Ernest—and I am having rather hard work really—you can come to the Palais with me now in this cab affair. Ask

for a permit, and then let us drive on to the prison and see Maurice and his aunts. It won't take an hour altogether, and I know it would have pleased mother and Aunt Isabel,' she said.

'All right,' said Ernest shortly, and added with a laugh, 'I hope they won't all fall on my neck and embrace me.'

'I scarcely think so, considering that they know you refused to see them, and wanted me to leave them to their fate,' said Irene dryly.

Ernest did not reply to this, but helped Irene out of the cab, for he was always courteous to his sister, and followed her through the Palais corridors, remarking, 'You seem well known here!'

'It would be odd if I were not,' said Irene grimly. 'One thing the war has done for me is to spoil Boulogne as a seaside resort; we used to love it so as children, do you remember? And now I think it will always be a nightmare to me.' And Ernest began to grasp what a heavy and difficult task Irene was struggling with.

The two upstairs officers, as Irene called them, rose and saluted Ernest, who wore the ribbon of an Indian frontier war, and gave him the order form without hesitation. The old colonel also rose and shook hands with him and Irene.

'Monsieur, I am enchanted to make your acquaintance. We know of the bravery of your family by your sister, and think ourselves

fortunate to have another to fight for us,' he said.

'My mother was very fond of my cousin Maurice de Carney—at least so we were taught to call him, and I can't help thinking of him as such still; and though I dislike leaving my sister in Boulogne fighting this case, I think she is doing her duty, as I hope to do mine for France. I trust to you, monsieur, to protect and help her,' said Ernest.

The colonel promised to do so, and the two drove off to the prison, where they cheered Maurice and his aunts considerably.

'What a girl! She twists every one round her finger!' cried the officer with the disagreeable laugh, coming out from the back of the room when Irene had gone. Irene never saw him at the Palais de Justice, where he was hidden by his high desk, and did not know that he was the man who sat at the next table to her at *table-d'hôte*.

'Not quite that. She has a purpose, and goes steadily on to accomplish it, like Jeanne d'Arc. A noble girl!' said the colonel.

The other gave his disagreeable laugh. 'If she is going to bring a new supporter or two here every day, I think the sooner we get that court-martial over the better,' he opined.

'The object of the court-martial is to see that justice is done, not to save ourselves trouble, I would remind you,' said the colonel.

‘If I had had my way justice would have been done long ago by shooting them all,’ said the officer, as he reached down his military cap, and, saluting stiffly, marched out of the office in a towering rage.

The colonel turned round to the officer who shared the high desk with the man who had just gone out. ‘Monsieur seems to have a strong feeling against the prisoners,’ he said.

‘Unfortunately, yes. It is a private quarrel with the prisoner, Monsieur de Carney,’ said the other, speaking already more civilly of Maurice. ‘It is hard for the prisoner that he is prosecuting.’

‘I did not know that,’ said the colonel, looking grave. He mentally made a note of the fact, and decided to speak to his junior officer on the subject, and see that Maurice was not prejudiced at the trial.

After dinner, at which Ernest renewed his acquaintance with Irene’s two ‘messmates,’ as she styled them, he went off in a motor-car to the front; and Irene was standing sadly looking after him, her lips pressed together to prevent herself giving way, when the gray-haired colonel came in at the door. He halted a moment, and then, saluting gravely, said, ‘Courage, mademoiselle! We will trust that monsieur your brother will return safely to you; but it is a noble duty he has gone to perform, and a soldier’s daughter should wish for no greater glory than death for one’s country.’

Irene smiled at him through unshed tears as she replied impulsively, 'I wouldn't mind it for myself; but I don't want Ernest to die a glorious death. Besides, he is just married.'

'Ah!' said the colonel, with a world of meaning in the little ejaculation, and, shaking his head, he passed on to pay a visit to some one in the hotel, while Irene went off to bed.

She was lying there, not attempting to sleep—for it was too early—but thinking and planning ways of strengthening her case for the defence, and wondering when, or if ever, she would get an answer to the cablegram she had sent through The Hague by the American Consul to find out old Louis's fate. A good deal hung on this. If old Louis were a prisoner, then he was no traitor, nor could Maurice have sent him to guide the Germans. Thus Irene was arguing to herself when she heard the voices of two men in the covered Palm Court below. They were speaking very low, but were just below her window, which, it will be remembered, looked out on to the court, and was, as usual, wide open.

'She is saying good-bye to her brother at this moment, but you can see her any morning and every morning going to the prison with De Carney's fiancée. Her name is Irene Mathers; but you won't be able to arrest her in Boulogne—she is too well protected. The only way will be to entice her out beyond the

boundaries without a permit, and there, naturally, she will be guilty of transgressing the law, and will be imprisoned,' said one.

'She will be released at once,' objected the other.

'I think not. The law is strict on the subject. Any one found outside the barriers of the town without a permit is imprisoned for fourteen days; and it is not always convenient to try them at once, you understand,' said his companion, and gave a laugh.

Irene recognised the laugh at once, though she did not understand at all why she had aroused the man's enmity. She did not feel called upon to reveal her presence, so she lay quite still; and presently she heard the men move their chairs back preparatory to leaving. Creeping to the window, she looked down, and saw the officer who sat at the table next hers and another elderly man leaving the Palm Court, which was empty but for themselves. Irene took a good look at the elderly man, and then, softly jumping into bed again, muttered to herself, 'A nice pair, you are! But I think I can score off you, and—I mean to!'

She did not sleep for a long time. When at last she did, it was, as may be imagined, to dream wild dreams, with the result that the Belgian lady next day exclaimed at the dark circles under her eyes, while the padre said kindly, 'Come for a drive in Lady Breck's car. She has lent it to me, and I can take you and

Mademoiselle Marie to the Indian camp, if you like.'

'No fear,' was Irene's surprising answer; and then with a laugh she added, 'It is not allowed without a permit.'

'I forgot,' said the chaplain; 'but I'll soon get you one. Come along.'

It was with a chuckle that Irene got into the car that afternoon, and with deliberate intent that she afterwards retailed to the Belgian lady the lovely drive she had had in the country.

The chaplain, to whom she revealed the plot against her, was very indignant, and told her he would not let her out of his sight.

But Irene laughed at his fears. 'Don't be afraid. I promise not to go outside the barrier with any one on any pretext whatever without a permit; and I am going to lead them a dance,' she declared.

The padre looked doubtful. 'I wish you were safely over this business,' he said.

'So do I,' agreed Irene; but she went on day after day visiting the prison, where her presence became such a usual thing that her permit was scarcely looked at, though she took care always to have it with her, and her gifts were always accepted for the prisoners. Between times she visited an *avocat*—the French lawyer and barrister combined—the best in the town, and a kindly and clever old man.

After two or three weeks he put down the pen with which he was making notes of the

case from what she said, and asked, 'Have you had any training for the legal profession, mademoiselle? I know English ladies go to the university, and you seem to have a logical mind.'

'I wouldn't be a lawyer for anything, and have to defend guilty people,' cried Irene with her usual candour.

'You are quite sure these De Carneys are innocent, then?' he asked, if the truth be known, in order to see her eyes flash as she protested their innocence. 'Well, well, do not distress yourself. I too believe it. To tell the truth, I greatly dislike defending spies and traitors, and do it *contre cœur*; but one must in justice say all there is to be said for them. If I had doubted the innocence of your friends at the beginning, I should never have doubted you or them after your evidence. What we have now to do is to convince the court-martial, and of that I am beginning to have hopes. But, you know, it will not be easy. There is a strong case against us,' he said.

'Only a lot of slanderous villagers,' said Irene with scorn.

The *avocat* looked through his papers. 'Thirty-eight witnesses against, and only you for,' he observed.

For a moment Irene felt a chill fear, and then said, 'I don't care if it was thirty-eight hundred. We'll beat them.'

The *avocat* smiled at her. 'At any rate,

they have not one witness to compare with you, mademoiselle.'

'If we can only get that cable about old Louis we shall canter in,' said Irene slangily, and went off smiling. In her heart she was very anxious, and longed to get the cable, which did not come, though she sent two or three cables by the American Consul, who, like every one else she came in contact with, sympathised heartily with her.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BITER BIT.

TEN days before the court-martial was to take place Irene was sitting at the wide window of the writing-room which looked on to the street, when she saw a motor-car drive up at great speed, and a man jump out. For a moment she was puzzled to remember where she had seen his face, and then it flashed across her! It was the elderly man she had heard talking in the Palm Court, and it did not surprise her when the hall-porter came up to her and said a gentleman wished to see her on urgent business.

Irene set her lips as she followed the porter, but managed to put on a surprised air when she saw a stranger waiting to speak to her.

‘Mees Irene Madders,’ he said, consulting a paper he had in his hand, and looking very grave.

‘That is my name, monsieur, as near as a Frenchman can pronounce it. I call myself Mathers. What do you want of me? If it is a subscription’—— suggested Irene, knowing perfectly well that it was nothing of the sort.

‘Mademoiselle, my errand is a very different and much sadder one. Your brother’—— he

began and stopped, for Irene grew pale. 'It is not serious, only a slight wound; but he wishes to see you, and I am to take you to him at once,' he said.

'Where is he? In a Boulogne hospital?' asked Irene, thinking that after all she must be mistaken in the man's motive, and that he really had only come out of kindness to take her to the hospital.

'No, not in Boulogne; some miles out. But I can soon take you there in my car,' he replied.

A light came into Irene's eyes which the man misinterpreted as relief at the thought of being taken to her brother without delay. Of course, she saw at once the trap that was being laid for her, but appeared to fall into it. 'I'll be ready in a minute or two,' she said, and was soon back in her long, dark, fur coat and little hat.

'May I see the order you brought for me to go outside the town?' she said as they stood on the step waiting for the chauffeur to set the car going.

'Oh—er,' said the man, feeling in all his pockets—'to be sure, I have no order. It is not necessary when one is on urgent business like this,' he explained.

'Urgent! I thought it was only a slight wound?' she said.

'I said slight to reassure you. It is not dangerous, but it's serious, and one never knows,' he wound up.

‘Then we had better make haste and get a permit for me,’ said Irene, jumping into the car.

The man stood for a moment in doubt, but eventually followed her, and they went off to the police, where he demanded, with much show of eagerness, a permit for ‘Mees Madders.’ He was coming back crestfallen to say they would not give it; but Irene, in whom the spirit of mischief was aroused, had followed him, and, getting carelessly between him and the door, said, ‘But, messieurs, it is incredible. This gentleman comes to my hotel and tells me my brother is wounded “seriously,” and “one never knows”—those were your words, monsieur—and wants to see me, and you refuse me a permit to let me go! I cannot understand this. There is something strange about the whole business. Why, if the wound is not dangerous, was he not brought to Boulogne or shipped to England? It looks to me like a case of kidnapping. I should like this man kept under observation,’ she said in her excellent French and her clear voice.

If ever a man looked trapped her companion did, especially as the chief police official said, ‘That was not the story you told us. You said mademoiselle wished to go for a drive with you,’ he said sternly.

‘So she did! This about her brother is a fabrication of her own,’ said the man desperately.

Irene looked at him with quiet contempt. 'Oh no, I think not. You see, monsieur, my room at the hotel looks on to the Palm Court, and I heard this expedition planned, and decided to catch you in your own net. If you doubt my word you can send for the army chaplain at Hôtel Darincourt ;' and she gave his name. 'I told him the tale some days ago,' said Irene.

The officials looked searchingly at the two in front of them, and, deciding at last to believe Irene, and call her witness, requested them both to take a seat while the car was sent for the chaplain.

He appeared in a very short time, looking anxious, and was relieved to see Irene. 'Did the scoundrel put his plot into execution ?' he asked eagerly.

It did not take long to explain matters to the chief official, who looked scandalised at the story of the plot Irene had overheard in the Palm Court. 'Mademoiselle, I can scarcely believe my ears !' he said.

'Nor could I, monsieur, so I went to the window and looked to be sure I did not dream. I saw this gentleman and another,' replied Irene.

'At all events, the truth of this man's story can easily be tested. He came to the hotel to fetch Mademoiselle Mathers to see her wounded brother,' began the padre.

'I did not. I came to ask her to come for a drive, as I know she is independent,

and does not mind going about without a chaperon. The wounded brother is only her trumped-up story, like the other, to explain her presence here with me,' said the man.

The chaplain turned on him with scorn. 'You contemptible coward! Unfortunately for you, the hall-porter overheard mademoiselle exclaim when you said her brother was wounded, and she asked which hospital he was in; and he came and told me at once, being sorry for her trouble,' he said.

'Monsieur, I have no option but to arrest you on a charge of kidnapping mademoiselle by false representations, and I can only express my deep regret that such an unpleasant experience should happen to mademoiselle, whom we all know and respect,' said the chief official with a bow.

'Come, Irene, I am going to take you back to the hotel with me,' said the chaplain. 'I dare say you were wise to have the man arrested; but I could have wished that you had chosen some other and less dramatic way of doing so. You are playing with edged tools, defying dangerous and unscrupulous men such as these. You ought to have come and told me that this man wanted to take you to see your brother, or have gone to madame the Belgian. It is no good defying the *convenances*, about which the French are so particular, by going off in a motor-car with an utter stranger,' he said, as they went home together down the steep hill from the old town to the hotel.

‘It seems to me that I made your acquaintance in that same unconventional way,’ said Irene dryly.

The padre laughed. ‘That is true, perhaps. I was wrong to introduce myself in that way ; but you looked so tired, and it was snowing fast, and you were late, and I forgot that I had not been formally introduced. Besides, there is a difference between an English clergyman and a French layman,’ he observed.

‘Yes ; and if it will make you more easy I promise to be chaperoned by madame or Lady Breck for the future, except when I go out with Marie, and that is chaperon enough in these times,’ said Irene.

The weather continued to be as bad as it could be, and in turn it hailed, snowed, sleeted, or blew a hurricane, occasionally doing all these things together. Every one in the hotel caught cold or *la grippe*, which is really influenza.

The chaplain had a bad cold, but declared it was nothing, and went to his work at the hospitals as usual. The Belgian lady had influenza, and was prostrated by it for three days. The first day she sent a message to Irene to say that she was too ill to come down, but trusted Irene would not mind dining at *table-d’hôte* alone, especially as the officer with the disagreeable laugh had disappeared.

But when the proprietress gave the message she said, ‘If you take my advice, mademoi-

selle, you will have your meals in a private sitting-room till madame comes down again. You are very handsome, and there are many young officers here.'

Irene laughed. 'They don't worry me one way or the other, and you must allow that they are very serious. However, I will dine in solitude, if you like; but it will be rather dull. Can't I have my meals with you in that dear little room I see you come out of sometimes?' she asked.

The proprietress looked very pleased. 'If you will condescend,' she said; and so it was arranged.

Irene continued, in spite of the weather, to pay her daily visits to the prison and carry the De Carneys' instructions to the *avocat*, who, by French law, which is severe towards the accused, was not allowed to see his clients until the day before the trial.

'Nothing daunts her. She comes through six inches of snow as smiling as if it were a fine spring day,' said one of the soldier jailers once, after Irene had come in stamping the snow off her boots.

It was difficult to get a smile out of the prisoners, who, as the time for the trial approached, became very nervous and depressed.

'Ah, Irene, you have never faced a hostile crowd or heard them mutter curses. It is like the growls of infuriated beasts, and I dread it,' cried Maurice, looking white and shaken.

‘Don’t be afraid, Maurice. I will meet the prison van at the steps in front of the Palais de Justice, and if they howl they will howl at us all together. You must support one aunt, and I will support the other; and you must hold your head high and ignore them, as the old nobles did the *canaille* at the time of the Revolution,’ said Irene.

The aunts were just as nervous; but Mademoiselle Joséphine thought only of her sister and Maurice; for herself she did not seem to mind in the least.

Irene went as usual two days before the trial to get her permit, which was given her at once now with a kindly smile, and stopped before the colonel. ‘Monsieur,’ she said, ‘I have a favour to ask.’

He raised his eyebrows and said, ‘I should have thought that daily visits in a special reception-room were favours enough.’

‘Well, I suppose you do consider that a favour, though your reception-room, as you call it, is the most awful dungeon of a place I have ever been in,’ she said.

The colonel did not argue the point, but inquired, ‘What is this favour, mademoiselle? I trust I shall be able to grant it.’

‘It is not to howl at the prisoners. I mean’—seeing his astonishment—‘not to let them be hooted at and pelted when they go into the Palais de Justice. They do so dread it.’

‘I will see that they are protected by soldiers, though I cannot promise to control

the mob; but you, mademoiselle, can enter by a private door,' he replied.

'Oh no, thank you; I am going to be at the front steps to meet the prison van,' announced Irene.

'Then I will see that you are protected too,' he said; 'but I think you should take care of yourself. You have a bad cold, and are out in all weathers, and you are undergoing a great strain.'

Irene winked away a tear. She was overstrained, and a kind word unnerved her; but she only laughed as she said, 'We English are used to bad weather, and take no notice of it; and it will soon be over now'—she meant the strain.

But that evening, when she came down to *table-d'hôte*, the Belgian lady, who was down too, enveloped in a shawl, looked at her and said, 'Irene, my dear child, you have *la grippe*. You must go to bed at once. Your face is crimson. You have fever, I am sure.'

'Oh no, no, I can't possibly have influenza just now. It is only the heat of this room. I shall be quite well to-morrow,' declared Irene, trying to swallow some soup, and failing.

The padre looked anxiously at her. 'Go to bed now, and take some aspirin, and you may feel better in the morning,' he urged.

'I think I will,' said Irene suddenly, the fact being that she could not hold up any longer.

'Madame,' she said as she passed the office

on her way to the lift, 'I have a cold, and I want aspirin and hot bottles, because I *must* be well to-morrow and the three next days.'

The three next days were the days of the court-martial, which was causing a great stir, partly from the position of the accused and partly because of Irene, whose dogged determination and stubborn championship of the prisoners caused either sympathetic or hostile comment.

Madame knew why Irene *must* be well, and was most sympathetic. 'Go to bed, mademoiselle, and you shall have a hot drink in a minute, and I will doctor you up somehow,' she said, looking concerned; and she was as good as her word.

The next day Irene woke up to find the maid, as usual, standing by her bedside. 'I couldn't touch coffee, thank you,' she said, opening heavy eyes.

'It is tea, mademoiselle. Madame thought you might prefer it. You must try to drink it,' urged the maid.

Irene was very thirsty, and managed to drink the tea; and, after sitting up a little, she said, 'I believe I can get up; but you must call a cab. I can't walk, I am sure.'

But when she got downstairs she found Lady Breck and her car waiting to take her to the prison. 'You ought not to go out to-day; but I knew nothing would keep you away from your dear prisoners their last day before the trial,' she said, as she looked with

disturbed face at Irene, who seemed very flushed.

‘I mustn’t give way for a minute. There are only four days more, and then it will all be over, and I can rest. But don’t talk about my being ill, please. I want to forget it,’ said Irene.

‘Very well, we will talk of something else. Marie du Chesne and her mother arrive this evening; but I think you had better not come and see them. Stop quietly at home for the rest of the day,’ said Lady Breck, as Irene got out of the car, while her kind friend stayed in it and waited for her.

‘Do you mind very much taking me into the town to do some shopping? The aunts and Maurice want some things for to-morrow—gloves, &c.—to make them look nice. I ought to have thought of it before,’ said Irene when she came out again.

‘You indeed! I wonder what else you ought to think of! Oh Irene! if I ever need a friend I hope you will be at hand,’ cried Lady Breck.

‘I hope it won’t be this kind of thing. I couldn’t stand it again,’ said Irene, and tried to laugh.

By the time they had done all the shopping, about which Irene took no end of trouble, the girl’s head was aching badly, and she could scarcely get out of the car to hand in the parcels at the prison.

‘Irene, you must go to bed at once, or you

will be unable to get up to-morrow,' protested Lady Breck.

Irene laughed a little wildly. 'Nothing, not wild horses, could keep me from being at the steps of the Palais de Justice to-morrow at half-past eight,' she said.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE COURT-MARTIAL.

A VOICE came into Irene's troubled dreams. 'Mademoiselle! *pauvre* mademoiselle! you asked to be awakened at half-past six.'

Irene gave a groan. 'Céline, give me that aspirin,' she said without opening her eyes, but holding out her hand.

'Mademoiselle, you cannot do it! Flesh and blood cannot do what is impossible. You are in a high fever, and you have eaten nothing for days,' protested the maid, as she put her arm under Irene's head and lifted it high enough for her to take her aspirin in a mouthful of tea.

'You never know what you can do till you try,' said Irene, lying back with brows knitted by the violent pain. 'Now, Céline, I shall be better directly; you can go away, thank you.'

But Irene was not better directly, or even after two more strong doses of aspirin. In fact, she had taken nine tabloids by eight o'clock, saying, 'Anyway, I'll get there if I die on the steps.' She resolutely finished dressing, put on her hat, and went down to the door of the hotel at ten minutes past eight, to find no motor there. She had a quarter

of an hour's walk uphill to the Palais de Justice !

How she did it Irene never knew, but when remonstrated with she said, 'It saved my life ; and I recommend as a cure for the "flu" getting up, fever or no fever, walking up a hill for a quarter of an hour before breakfast, and standing in the driving rain on some steps.'

At any rate that was what Irene did, and at five-and-twenty minutes past eight she was waiting on the steps wiping the perspiration from her forehead.

She was tall, and made a striking picture as she stood on the steps with the soldiers below, in their long bright-blue coats and with fixed bayonets, grouped so as to enclose her.

'Who is she? A relative of the accused? English without a doubt! She is here to meet them!' was murmured round her, and the French crowd which had come to howl entertained itself instead by watching the dramatic meeting between Irene and her friends ; held its breath as the soldiers crossed bayonets to prevent her springing to the door ; and gasped as Irene, brushing aside the bayonets with her two hands, stepped between them to the door, and with a smile shook hands with Maurice, whose cowed expression changed as he saw her. Turning with his graceful courtesy, he helped down his aunts, whom Irene kissed and welcomed as if the Palais de Justice belonged to her !

The soldiers looked on in silence. They all knew her of old, and by experience found it best not to thwart her. Besides, she was evidently privileged, and they themselves sympathised with her.

So the little procession of four mounted the steps and went up the interminable stairs to the Grande Salle, where the court-martial was to be held, Irene helping Mademoiselle Clémentine, who was crippled with rheumatism, while Mademoiselle Joséphine leaned on Maurice and encouraged him.

The crowd looked on in silence. The pathetic figures of the two old ladies and the pale, handsome face of Maurice aroused the sympathies of the majority, and the hostile minority only muttered low. Moreover, there was no chance of an ugly rush or violence, because the soldiers barred the entrance to the Palais till the four prisoners were in the Salle.

‘They are more human here,’ said Maurice as he took his seat on the front bench, facing the platform, with the two aunts alongside, and a soldier on either side.

‘Oh yes, I don’t think you need fear annoyance,’ said Irene, not thinking it necessary to explain her part in the ‘humanity.’

Presently the court was requested to stand, and the judges of the court-martial arrived, and took their seats on the platform in a semicircle. Irene looked at their stern faces with a little fear. She noticed that one of

them was a man who had sat for weeks at a table a little way off at the Hôtel Darincourt, and wished she had known, especially as she found he was the president.

In the Salle was also the colonel, who looked keenly at her. After a short speech, of which Irene heard not a word, owing to a loud buzzing in her head, the names of the witnesses were called; and as she heard the thirty-eight names read out, and saw the mayor of the village and all the other 'great little' people of the small town near the Château Carney stand up and answer to their names—all ranged against her—she felt that the *avocat* had been right, and that she had a hard fight before her. Then, with all the other witnesses, she was requested to leave the Salle, and was shown into a corridor lined with hard benches, on one of which Irene sank, shivering a little.

'Mademoiselle is ill? Mademoiselle is a witness for us?' said a rough-looking woman to Irene.

The throbbing in her head prevented Irene from quite understanding what was said; but she heard the words 'ill' and 'witness,' and said, 'Yes, I have a bad cold, and no wonder in such weather; but I am a witness, and was obliged to come out to-day.'

'Ah, how good of you! But the British are all our Allies. We will shoot these traitors, and your friends in the trenches will be safe,' hissed the woman in her ear.

‘They are not traitors. They are innocent loyal French people,’ she cried in clear tones, rousing herself.

In a moment she was surrounded by angry, threatening faces ; but it was not easy to cow Irene, even though she was feeling desperately ill. She rose from her seat, looked with scornful disdain on them all, waved them aside, and took her seat as far from them as possible.

An officer who had been standing at the door of the crowded Salle turned round and watched the scene, and then going up to Irene, he said, ‘You are ill, mademoiselle, and you shiver. Are you cold?’

‘There is a draught, I think, and I have a bad cold,’ she acknowledged.

The officer went away, and presently a soldier brought a rug and a *chaufferette*, which is a stool filled with charcoal to keep the feet warm. ‘*Monsieur le lieutenant* has sent this, and begs mademoiselle to wrap herself up warmly,’ he said as he put the rug round her, looking with sympathetic eyes at Irene’s flushed face and heavy eyes.

Just then she saw him and the soldier who guarded the entrance to the witnesses’ corridor stand at attention and salute, and her friend the padre and an officer whom she had often seen at the hotel passed through to go to the court-martial, after saluting Irene and saying, ‘Good luck!’ and ‘God speed!’

Their presence seemed to relieve Irene.

She put her head back against the corner of the wall where she was sitting, and, warmed by the heat at her feet, went fast asleep.

The officer who had sent her the rug, and who had taken up his position at the door of the Salle, glanced at her ; then making a sign to a soldier, he told him to stand near Irene. 'See that none of that *canaille* molest or rob her,' he said, nodding his head in the direction of some of the witnesses from the village, who were peasants of the very lowest type.

The soldier took up his position on guard, and would not allow any one to approach within some yards, or make any noise, which he declared was against the rules.

And so the day wore on, and Irene slept on, to wake with a start and hear the soldier say, 'The audience is suspended for to-day, mademoiselle. You can go home.'

Irene started up. 'The prisoners? Where are they?' she asked.

'They are waiting in the Salle until the crowd has dispersed,' the soldier explained.

'I must go to them!' cried Irene, but swayed when she tried to walk. 'Oh, what has happened to my legs? I can't walk!' she exclaimed.

'Mademoiselle is evidently very ill. Take my arm, and I will help you downstairs to a cab,' he suggested.

'No; I must go to the prisoners,' she persisted; and the soldier, seeing argument was useless, helped her to get there.

Maurice sprang forward when she appeared, swaying on her feet. 'Irene, you are ill! You have done too much for us!' he cried.

Marie du Chesne, who was there, came forward too. 'We were so sorry the car was too late to fetch you, Irene. I was not ready in time; but we have phoned for it, and it will take us back. We came in, and can get out, by a private door through the kindness of an officer who knows Jean,' she said.

'I am going out by the front entrance, if Maurice will give me his arm,' declared Irene, adding over her shoulder, 'You and Madame du Chesne can go out by the side way, and I'll join you later.' She walked on with Maurice on one side and the soldier on the other, for, as she said with a laugh, her legs had turned to jelly and were of no use whatever to her.

Marie turned to her mother doubtfully; but Madame du Chesne said decidedly, 'We have done our duty, and more, in coming here to-day, and we are not going to run the risk of insults at the front entrance.—*Au revoir*, Maurice; and you, mesdemoiselles, courage!' and she went off by the side staircase.

The crowd, which had gathered outside the railings, was, as before, occupied with Irene, who accidentally slipped on the top step and nearly brought the little soldier down with her. Doubt as to whether she was a prisoner kept them hesitating until the accused were in the van. Then the door of a motor stand-

ing there was opened, and Lady Breck, getting out, slipped her arm into Irene's and half-lifted her in.

'She is only a relative. They have influence, these prisoners—British influence. They will escape,' said a man who had been bitterly hostile all the time.

'We had better not offend the British. Boulogne is full of them, and they are fighting magnificently for us,' said another.

'Irene, you must go straight to bed, and I am going to stay with you, if Madame du Chesne and Marie will excuse me,' said Lady Breck.

Irene did not answer. Her head lay back and her eyes were shut, and the two French ladies shook their heads at each other.

'I knew she was overdoing it. All this rushing backwards and forwards across the Channel, and these interviews in that deathly cold prison, have been too much for her! And why should she excite herself like this? A promise is all very well; but when it entails such suffering one is excused from keeping it,' protested Madame du Chesne.

Lady Breck pressed Irene's hand silently; and, true to her word, she remained by her bedside till the evening.

On her way out of the hotel Lady Breck met the chaplain, who asked her anxiously, 'How is Irene?' Every one called her Irene, somehow.

'Very weak and exhausted, but she has no

fever. I don't know how she will get to the Palais to-morrow, and yet she will be wanted. The evidence to-day was damning, and the feeling of the Salle was strongly against the prisoners, I thought,' replied Lady Breck.

'Yes; but it was false evidence, and Irene's will smash it all; and she will go if she has to be taken on a stretcher,' he replied.

Lady Breck laughed, but tears stood in her eyes as she said good-bye to the padre.

As the latter had prophesied, Irene managed to get to the Palais de Justice and meet the prison van as before; but to-day she was flushed, and Lady Breck, who took her there, saw that she was feverish again, and began to wonder whether she would be able to give her evidence coherently, if at all.

The second day passed with hour after hour of hostile evidence: how the ladies had been seen on the balcony of the château 'beckoning to the Germans and waving flags, monsieur; waving our French flag to beckon them on,' as one witness cried eagerly.

There was a murmur through the Salle, and the president said, 'You are sure it was a French flag?' And on the woman repeating her assertion, he exclaimed, 'Then it was an act of defiance, as it could not please the Germans to have our tricolour waved in their faces.'

'It was so, *Monsieur le Président*, and I warned my aunt Joséphine not to enrage them; but she hates them, so she *would* defy them,' put in Maurice.

‘But I saw her smiling at them!’ cried the witness angrily, as she saw her evidence used against her.

‘Mademoiselle wears glasses, I see. She is short-sighted?’ asked the *avocat* suavely of the witness.

‘Yes, monsieur,’ said the witness.

‘Can you see me?’ he asked, smiling at her.

‘Certainly, monsieur. I see you distinctly,’ she said, suddenly understanding what his question meant.

‘And what am I doing?’ he demanded, shutting his eyes.

‘You are standing up and looking at me,’ she hazarded.

‘Just so, and smiling and beckoning, as were the Demoiselles de Carney! Only I fear, as my eyes were shut, I did not see as much as you do with your short sight, which cannot see across this Salle, and yet could distinguish what the Demoiselles de Carney did a hundred yards off,’ said the *avocat*, sitting down amid a burst of laughter. The laughter was renewed when he questioned the witness about the signalling from the west window, and after making her commit herself deeply, proved from the mouth of the mayor that it was the effect of the sunset. ‘And, *Monsieur le Président*, I think it only right to say that the dust lay so thick on the window-sills and *persiennes* [venetian blinds] of the rooms, which I have been into, that I am

convinced that they have not been opened or approached for a year or more,' he added.

'The matter of signalling from the west windows is now cleared up; and we can also dismiss the accusation against these ladies of beckoning to the enemy, as the witness, though she could see the flags being waved, cannot distinguish a face across this Salle.'

And so it went on.

The British Consul, coming out of the room, said to Irene, 'Did you ever read the *Autobiography of a Slander*? Because this case reminds me of it.'

'I don't want to read it, then,' said Irene, who had only one thought in her head, and that was to keep herself from succumbing till to-morrow, and who found a tiresome drowsiness overtaking her, to which she dared not give way, as her evidence would be wanted directly.

'Can I get you anything?' he asked.

'I don't think so, thank you, unless—— I am a teetotaler by rights, but I would take some stimulant as a medicine if it would give me strength just for a day,' she said, lifting heavy eyes to him.

'I don't believe it would do any good; but I know a chemist near, and as you won't have a doctor, I'll see what he says;' and he went off.

'Here, drink this. It will pull you together for the time, and do no harm,' he said, returning with some white stuff in a medicine-glass.

‘Thank you very much. It is very nasty, so perhaps it is good for one. Most nasty things are, I believe,’ she said as she drank it off.

She had hardly put it down, when her name was called.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ACQUITTED.

IRENE clenched her hands tightly together, and then, standing up and throwing her head back, she smiled at the consul as she said, 'I am all right now, thank you,' and went into the Salle looking neither to right nor to left.

The president said something in an undertone to the military clerk behind him, and the clerk came down and placed a chair for Irene, only just in time, for her legs again felt 'like jelly.' But she managed to smile at the De Carneys, and made the declaration, which has taken the place of an oath, in a clear, distinct voice.

Suddenly the drowsiness seemed to leave her, and she felt wide awake, with her mind quite clear.

'Mademoiselle, you have known the family De Carney for many years?' said the president. 'Narrate what you know.'

So Irene began, and told how her aunt had insisted upon Maurice being brought up to believe himself her son, and how she had imagined him her cousin till the day the Prussian officer came and made his private survey of the De Carney grounds. 'And, oh monsieur! the only person who has done France harm is

myself. I did not hate the Germans then, as the De Carneys and all of you do, and I believed him when he said he was doing no harm, and I let him go, and told no one except old Louis. He and his son tried to trace him; but it was too late. Of course the wretch was spying; but I never guessed it,' cried Irene penitently.

'But this old Louis? He deserted to the enemy,' protested the president, referring to his notes.

'Not he! That is the silliest slander of all the slanders that have been uttered here,' retorted Irene.

'Every one cannot be wrong, mademoiselle,' objected the president.

'No, of course not; I am right,' said Irene promptly. The officers on the tribunal suppressed smiles, she was so evidently in earnest. 'And the mayor,' she added as an afterthought.

'Proceed with your evidence,' said the president.

Irene put her hand to her head. It had all gone—all the proofs she had meant to give; she could not remember a word.

'Is that all you have to say?' asked the president.

'No, but I can't remember,' said Irene.

The president, who knew all about Irene, having lived at the same hotel for some weeks, and heard her and her doings discussed, knew also that she was ill, and had eaten nothing for

days; so he waited patiently, and then said, 'Mademoiselle, you may retire.'

Irene rose to go in despair. She saw Maurice's face of distress, and all came back to her. 'No, monsieur, I have not finished. I ought to tell you how distressed my cousin—as I used to think him—was when they had to tell him the truth, and how I had to argue that it was no disgrace to have German blood in one. If it comes to that, what about our King, and King Edward, whom you all loved? He was as German as Maurice de Carney, and loved the Germans as little as he!' she cried; and for another half-hour she talked on, making her witty, caustic comments on the evidence against the De Carneys in a way that would never be tolerated in an English court, but is allowed in France. Then, in the middle of a sentence, the drowsiness came over her again. She finished the sentence, and saying, 'That is all, monsieur,' bowed to the tribunal, and was going away, when a member begged to ask a question.

'Do you, mademoiselle, think it wise to release any one against whom there is the least breath of suspicion, when the lives of your brothers and ours may be endangered by him?' he asked, and every one listened breathless for Irene's answer.

She had her back to the room, so no one saw a blank, puzzled look come over her face except the judge.

The man who had spoken let an air of

triumph come over his face. This was fatal to him. It spurred Irene's flagging brain.

'There is no real cause for suspicion against the family De Carney. It is their misfortune, not their fault, that M. de Carney married a German, and if you are going to act on that principle you will have no prisons to hold the suspected people. Why, if you like to give me twenty-four hours I'll trump up a charge against you—any of you,' she said, her eyes sweeping the members of the tribunal—'or, for that matter, any one in this room, that will make the authorities shoot you to-morrow morning, if they believe me.'

'Colossal—magnificent!' muttered an officer; while for the first time a smile flickered for a moment on the face of the president, and the *avocat* chuckled to himself.

'That will do, mademoiselle. I congratulate your friends on their witness, and I do homage to the generosity of soul which brought you over to aid this family in distress,' he said, bowing to her.

Irene tried to stand, and failed; then, waving aside the soldier who came to her aid, she made her way to a seat, where, next to the chaplain and close beside the De Carneys, she sat for the rest of the trial. But of the summing up and the speeches for and against not one word did she take in, and she kept asking herself if this were madness.

As she sat there looking dully in front of her there was a movement, and a hurried

messenger came into the Salle with a communication for *Monsieur l'Avocat*, who opened it, gave a 'Humph!' and listened with a curious smile to the speech for the prosecution.

'This old servant, Louis by name, has never returned, and we are asked to believe that he is a prisoner; but I tell you, *Monsieur le Président*, that he is a traitor, and is helping the enemy by order of Monsieur de Carney.'

'Pardon,' said the *avocat*, getting up. 'What proof have you of that?'

'I am told so by these witnesses, who saw him go willingly away with the Germans,' said the prosecutor.

'Just as they saw the Demoiselle de Carney smiling at them! And if I prove him to be a prisoner?' demanded the *avocat* in suave tones.

'You have not been able to do so, or you would have produced an answer to those numerous cables you have sent off. When you do'——

'Well, when I do?' said the *avocat*.

'Then I own him no traitor, but a sufferer for France,' said the prosecutor.

For answer the *avocat* rose and read: "From the American Consulate General.—Louis Chemin, of Château Carney, is a prisoner at Doberitz, and begs for news of his relatives, and parcels of bread, if possible, food not being too plentiful."

A murmur of sympathy went through the Salle.

The chaplain glanced at Irene. If she had not looked so unheeding he would have accused her of arranging another dramatic situation; but it did not rouse her, and the trial went on.

At last it was over. The president gave out that this being a 'court-martial at the front,' the verdict would be considered at once, and would be announced as soon as decided.

Meanwhile the court was cleared, and the prisoners were sent to a small room.

Irene went up to the public prosecutor. 'Monsieur, I want to know if I may spend this time with my friends.'

'Certainly, mademoiselle,' he said. 'Anything else?'

'No. Yes, please, a permit for the prison,' she added.

He smiled. 'Perhaps you will not need one. I did not know I had such an able opponent. I am inclined to believe you have gained and I have lost, and—I shall not weep over it! But here is a permit in case;' and he wrote it with his own hands.

'Thank you,' said Irene. The compliment had fallen on deaf ears, and she did not notice that the great man himself was helping her down some stairs to a little room where the three prisoners sat.

'Mademoiselle may remain with the accused,' he said to the soldier on guard.

'That was the public prosecutor!' cried the

soldier, in amazement. 'That promises well for you.'

'It will soon be over,' said Irene, taking her seat between the two old ladies, and holding a hand of each.

Mademoiselle Joséphine was praying, and her lips moved; but Mademoiselle Clémentine shook her head. 'I can pray no more. I have never deserved this disgrace. I will say a *Te Deum* if we are acquitted; but I cannot pray now,' she repeated.

It seemed hours before they heard the rushing of feet as the crowd stampeded back into the Salle overhead, and then a roar.

'Go, Irene. Find out what it is,' cried Maurice.

'Monsieur,' protested the soldier, 'she may be hurt. The people are angry, by the sound of them.'

'Oh, then, don't go, Irene!' they all cried.

But Irene went off, declaring, 'I'm all right. The soldiers will protect me.'

'I wish you an acquittal, *monsieur et mesdames*,' said the soldier; and then Irene came flying back, aches, pains, and drowsiness forgotten. 'Acquitted! Acquitted! You are free!' she cried, kissing the old ladies rapturously.

Yes, the trial was over. The prisoners were taken up to the Salle, which had been emptied of its audience—the French are thoughtful of people's feelings when possible

—and they were told the verdict, and got out somehow without hurt. Irene, who, of course, went with them, never all her life would forget that sea of faces, some very angry and hostile, thirsting for their blood, through which the soldiers forced a way for them.

‘Your friends are free, mademoiselle; but they cannot leave France,’ said the governor to Irene, as he came to congratulate her when she accompanied them back to the prison, where they had to wait until the decree had been signed by the Commander-in-Chief.

Irene’s face fell. ‘I am sorry,’ she said to Maurice and his aunts; ‘but you must come and visit me when the war is over.’

The governor looked kindly at her as he said, ‘You will be the better for not seeing any one or anything to remind you of these events. You have too much heart, mademoiselle. Go back to England and rest, and distract your thoughts.’

Irene only laughed. But when she got to the hotel she found the chaplain waiting for her. ‘I have a week’s leave, and am going off to-morrow morning, and I want a companion. Will you come?’ he inquired.

‘I don’t think I can. I want to go to bed for a week,’ she said, and suddenly fainted.

The birds were singing sweetly when Irene opened her eyes, and she looked round wonderingly. ‘Where am I?’ she asked.

‘You are at home, dear Irene, and alive,

thank Heaven!’ said Miss Mathers with a sob.

‘But—I am at Hôtel Darincourt,’ protested Irene.

‘Oh no, you are not, miss. It’s all right. You came home in a hospital ship with the padre; and you have been very ill, and no wonder; but now you are all right,’ said a young woman in a nurse’s dress, smiling at her as she gave her something to drink.

Irene pushed it away. ‘The De Carneys! Are they all right? Are they free?’ she asked.

‘Yes, free and all right; and they will be quite happy when they hear you are well again,’ said her cousin.

Irene gave a long sigh. ‘Then I’d like to die peaceably. There doesn’t seem anything worth living for,’ she argued.

‘In the meantime, before you decide to die, perhaps you will read these letters which have come for you,’ said the nurse dryly.

Irene opened her eyes languidly, but when she saw French stamps, and recognised the bold handwriting of Maurice on one, and the neat characters of Mademoiselle Joséphine de Carney on another, she held out her hand for them, and read as follows:

‘Irene, *reine des jeunes filles*, I can never, never thank you enough for your devoted heroism’—Irene groaned, and muttered as she glanced down the page, ‘I wonder how much more of this high-falutin’—— and then ex-

claimed with delight, 'Oh, how splendid! Maurice is a *soldat français*! Oh, how glad Aunt Isabel and mother would have been! That kills all doubt. The villagers must realise now that he is innocent.'

The nurse saw with satisfaction that Irene was roused out of her state of depression, and after giving her a cordial to drink, let her read the other letter.

'This is from Marie, Maurice's fiancée. She is delighted too, and they are going to be married quietly. Why, they are to be married to-day; and, oh, Cousin Annie, send them a wire,' said Irene.

'And the aunts are to be at the wedding, which is to take place in Paris; after which the two Demoiselles de Carney are going to a villa on the Riviera belonging to Marie's father, there to forget the sad experiences through which they have passed, in the beautiful scenery and warm sunshine of the south.'

'Well,' commented Irene as she laid down the letters with a sigh of relief, having omitted all the effusive thanks of her French correspondents—'well, that is all over and done with, and—— Oh! I am so tired.'

'Oh, my dear, you must not be tired. You have done one good deed—a brave deed; but thousands of brave deeds are being done daily, hourly, by our boys, and there is plenty for you to do to help them. Your country

wants every woman in it to do her very best,' cried Miss Mathers, who was sitting at a table, surrounded by sandbags and all sorts of work, which apparently had superseded the bootikins and fleecy shawls of other days.

'I will send the padre to you,' said the nurse.

'Is he still in England?' asked Irene.

The nurse laughed. 'He has been back to France, at the front, was wounded, and is home again, and would like to see you when you are better.'

'All right,' said Irene.

A few days later he came and talked; and some days after that Irene consented to be lifted into a carriage and taken for a drive.

'What we have to do is to make her take an interest in life again,' said the nurse.

But she need not have been afraid. Irene's healthy mind soon recovered its tone, and she took up her Red Cross work again, and was very busy after a month or two.

'All the same,' said Ernest's wife, Grace, 'she is changed. She never says those funny things she used to, and she is so grave when she is not laughing.'

'Oh my dear, I think her so much improved, so much gentler and more sympathetic; and the wounded men worship her,' protested Miss Mathers.

'She was always sympathetic, and she is much too quiet and serious for twenty,' protested Grace.

‘Is it to be wondered at? I cry now when I think of all she went through, according to the chaplain and that Belgian lady, and in such awful weather, too,’ said Cousin Annie.

‘Well, the Belgian and her wounded husband are coming to-morrow. That may rouse her.’

In a way it did, for the Belgian lady told the funny part of Irene’s doings at the hotel, and made her laugh; and as Miss Mathers said, ‘No one feels very light-hearted nowadays. Besides,’ she added with acuteness, ‘Irene always had depths which no one suspected, or she could not have done what she did. One against thirty-eight, and that one only a girl and a foreigner.’

‘But that girl was Irene Mathers, remember,’ said the Belgian lady.

THE END.

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